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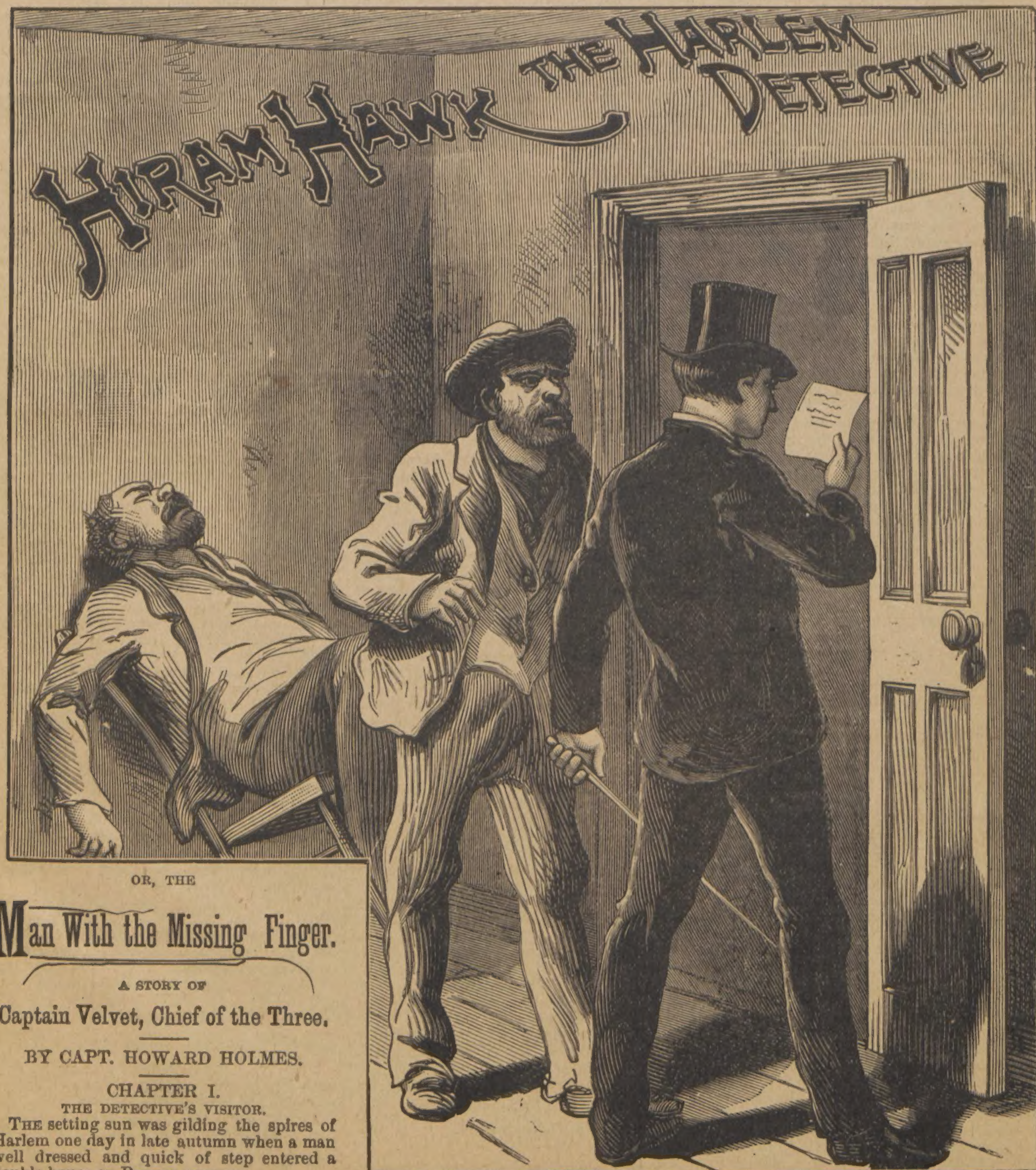
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OR, THE

Man With the Missing Finger.

A STORY OF

Captain Velvet, Chief of the Three.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES.

CHAPTER I.

THE DETECTIVE'S VISITOR.

THE setting sun was gilding the spires of Harlem one day in late autumn when a man well dressed and quick of step entered a double house on Bremer avenue.

It was a dwelling well known all along the

HIRAM HAWK TURNED AWAY TO READ IT, WATCHED CLOSELY BY SILAS SEABOLD.

the thoroughfare and there were few people who had not seen the main occupant or who did not know of his calling.

Hiram Hawk was a detective.

No one knew much about the early life of this man who had settled down in Harlem without any flourish of trumpets, and with his niece and housekeeper, two singular people, by the way, had lived quietly there.

The people who came to the house now and then were supposed to belong to the same profession as Hiram Hawk, and the neighbors, a bit curious like all neighbors, watched them from behind half drawn shutters and doors that stood conveniently ajar.

Hawk himself was a man on the sunny side of thirty.

With clear blue eyes that never seemed to lose their softness, and smooth faced, he looked one of nature's clever gentlemen, and the most observing would not have called him one of the keenest of trackers, and, as a solver of mysteries, one who had no equal.

Always neatly dressed, and with a kindness of heart that drew to him the waifs of the great city, Hiram was well liked in all quarters, and but for his calling, which made some over-sensitive people shudder, he would have been welcomed in "high-toned society."

The man who opened the door of the double house on the evening which opens this romance was the detective himself.

He had just come from his little office down-town, and passing into the sitting-room to the right of the hall was about to turn on the gas, for the room was already dark, when a little girl bounded in and threw her arms about him.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came home safely," cried the child, who was not more than thirteen, with a mass of sunshiny hair and bright eyes—a spirituelle creature with clear white skin. "I have been afraid ever since the man went away."

"The man, Mellie?"

"The man who came and waited for you half an hour in this room. Parker let him in, and he said he preferred to see you at home, and so without more ado he sat down and remained that length of time."

"You don't know what he wanted, Mellie?"

"Oh, he never told me a word, though I tried to pump him. I came in three times and tried to talk, but he wouldn't have it that way and I had to give up."

"Was he a young man?"

"Not very. He had the blackest eyes you ever saw, and the prettiest beard all streaked with gray; but, Parker says it was false."

"Where is Parker?"

This question was answered by the opening of a door, and a middle aged woman, with thin, angular features, but rather comely withal, came in.

"Here's Parker," cried the girl, "She can tell you about him."

Parker, or Lora Parker, as her name was, was the ferret's housekeeper. She had been with him three years and was supposed to be the sole sharer of the man's secrets, if he shared them with any one.

As the woman entered, the little girl drew off and seated herself in an arm-chair near the table.

"Mellie tells me you have had a visitor?" Hiram remarked inquiringly.

"You had one awhile ago. He came in and took a seat here even after I told him that you were liable to be out till long after dark. He said he would wait awhile, anyhow, and sat here for nearly an hour."

"Was it that long, Parker?" asked Mellie.

"Quite so, child. You came in two or three times and tried to pump him, you know."

"And got nothing."

The little one laughed and looked at Hiram, who smiled and again turned to Parker.

"What did he say when he went off?—anything?"

"Not much. I went with him to the door and he stopped there and looking at me said: 'Tell him I will call again.'"

"Did he say when?"

"He did not."

"Mellie intimates that he was somewhat disguised."

"I didn't think the beard was natural. It was so shiny and well combed—looked just like false beards, you know; and then the gloves, or one of them at least, seemed to have a stuffed finger."

"Did you ever?" cried the child, looking at the detective with astonishment. "I believe Parker sees everything! I looked at his gloves, saw them on his hands—he kept them on all the time he was here—but I couldn't see a sign of a stuffed finger."

Parker made no reply, but looked at the ferret, who seemed to understand.

"Where was Noodles all this time?" he quietly asked.

"He went out a few minutes before the man came and I haven't seen him since."

"Therefore you had no one to shadow the caller."

"No one, and I couldn't go myself. But I noticed the affair of the glove and I'm quite sure."

"What hand was it, Parker?" asked the child.

The housekeeper gave a rather haughty toss of her head and looked at the detective without replying to Mellie's question.

"I might have been at home a little sooner, and if I had known some one was waiting for me I would have made it a point to have seen him."

"He appeared anxious, but not overly so. He didn't care to say much and a part of the time he read, at the table—"

"I saw him there the second time I came into the room," exclaimed the little girl. "I'm quite sure he had a pen in his hand, but the moment I opened the door he laid it down."

Hiram walked over to the table and bent over the blotters and scattered sheets that littered it.

He picked up several pens on the brass rack and looked at them one at a time.

"Mellie is right," said he, glancing at Parker. "He used a pen."

"But he dropped it the moment I came in and didn't resume it while I stayed."

Hawk rummaged through the papers, and at last picked up a torn sheet which he looked at with a slight show of triumph on his face.

"Did he write any, Uncle Hi?" asked the child who was watching him closely.

The detective folded the half sheet and placed it in his pocket.

"I shall be back before long," he said addressing the woman. "I won't be gone over three hours."

The eyes of the two met, and Parker, stepping to the table, said in tones that did not reach the child's ear:

"There was no little finger on the man's right hand—I will swear to that. I saw that despite the glove he wore, and although the finger of the glove was filled with something, probably cotton, you will see that there is a missing finger."

Hiram nodded and started for the door.

"Are you going out to look for that man?" asked Mellie.

"Do you think so, child?" and the detective picked the little one up and kissed her.

"It looks that way to Mellie; but she wants you to be careful. He had the blackest eyes I ever saw; hadn't he, Parker?"

"Black eyes are all alike to me," was the answer, accompanied by a smile. "I can't say that some are blacker than others."

"But this man's were so very black that you couldn't help looking at them; I saw that, Parker."

Parker followed the detective into the hall, and laying her hand softly upon his sleeve, asked:

"What if he comes back while you're gone?"

"If he does, detain him: and if Noodles comes in, see that he is at his old post. You understand, Parker?"

The woman dropped her head, signifying that she understood, and Hiram laid his hand on the door-knob.

"The man left a note for you among the papers?"

"Yes."

"Then you know him?"

"I do not."

The door opened and shut, and the detective was gone.

"Look here, Parker: did you really notice

that the man had a missing finger?" asked Mellie, as the housekeeper turned back.

"Don't let that concern you in the least," was the reply. "If he had it was the man's business, and if I saw that there was a missing finger—saw it through the glove, why, it only shows that Parker's eyes are still good."

She caught the girl up and kissed her, much to Mellie's aversion, and putting her down ran through the hall and vanished.

"What a woman Parker is!" muttered the child, looking after her. "She can almost see through a wall. I wonder where Uncle Hiram picked her up? Sometimes I think she has a gift as strange as the one I possess, and then I wonder if she doesn't rob me of some of my power while I sleep."

Half a minute later strains of music reverberated through the house, and Parker, opening the parlor door softly, discovered the child at the piano.

For some time the housekeeper stood at the door and listened. The music was sad and low, and seemed to fill her heart with sorrow, for she passed her hand slowly over her eyes and leaned against the jamb.

"Just think that she can't be with us long!" she said under her breath. "The time is near at hand, according to what the doctors tell Hiram, when she must leave us, and then—what will he do when she is gone?"

All at once the music ceased and the little player slid from the stool and crossed the room to a velveted arm-chair, in which she ensconced herself with a sigh.

"Any one can see that it is sapping her strength," continued Parker, still unseen by the child. "It hurts Hiram to see her act that way, and it is good that he isn't here now."

She paused rather abruptly, for Mellie rose from the chair and seemed to grope her way toward the opposite wall, though the parlor was well lighted.

"It's the trance spell again," murmured the woman, watching intently.

"Heavens! what if she should go through with the strange spell now?"

Parker entered the room, but paused a few feet from the child and held her breath.

The wall in front of the detective's charge was white and bare, and the housekeeper saw her put up her hands.

"She is going to make marks there!" decided Parker; "but they never remain long, and won't be there when Hiram returns. Now, what is she writing in the trance with her fingers, that grow moist the moment they touch the wall? What is she saying with them? I must know, so as to tell Hiram when he comes back."

Slowly, and as if in pain, the trance-child was tracing something on the wall, and Parker, standing near enough to have touched her, watched her with intent gaze.

"What's that? Heavens! It looks like a hand!"

Parker's strained eyes seemed as if leaping from her head, and her thin face, without a vestige of color, was a sight under the gas.

"It is a hand! It has but three fingers; the little one is missing. It is a right hand, too—just like the one I saw in the house this afternoon. And, what is that she has written underneath the hand? It looks like a name!"

The long, slim body was bent forward; Parker almost touched the trance-child, in her eagerness, and saw traced on the wall in moist letters, which would not remain long, as she knew, the name of:

"TILMAN HOY."

The next moment Mellie tottered back and fell into Parker's arms with a wearisome sigh—almost a groan.

CHAPTER II.

NOODLES'S PROPHECY.

THE dark orbs of Lora Parker glowed with pity as she carried the trance-child to a sofa and laid her tenderly thereon.

There was no color in the young face, and the hands were white and limp.

It seemed as if the child's efforts at the wall had completely exhausted her, and for some time she lay like a corpse upon the crimson pillow.

At last, Parker moistened the lips with water, and Mellie came out of the trance.

She opened her eyes, and, seeing the housekeeper bending over her, put up her arms and encircled Parker's neck.

"Have I been to the wall again?" she whispered. "Tell me truthfully, Parker, for I don't want anything kept back."

"Yes, child, you have been there."

The girl's gaze wandered to the wall, and for a moment rested there.

A visible shudder passed over her frame.

"What did I do there, Parker?"

"You drew with your finger."

"What did I draw?"

"A hand."

"Was that all?"

The semblance of a smile came to Mellie's lips.

"Where were you, Parker?—watching me?"

The housekeeper nodded and watched on.

"It is strange that I should go to the wall and draw a hand there," mused the child aloud. Then she looked quickly at Parker and asked:

"Was there anything peculiar about the hand I drew?"

"It had a missing finger."

The trance-child started.

"Why, I never saw such a hand as that. A missing finger?" and she seemed to smile again. "And you don't know whose it was, Parker?"

"You wrote underneath the hand the name of Tilman Hoy."

"I never heard of that name. Strange, isn't it? I must have been out of my head."

"You were in one of your trances, child. You do some strange things while in that state."

"Uncle Hiram has told me so. So I made a hand on the wall and underneath it wrote the name of Tilman Hoy?"

She laughed a little at this, but the laugh soon died away and she grew sad again.

"Do you think it is there yet?" she asked.

"No, child, what you draw on the wall never remains very long and hand and name have already vanished."

"Oh, Parker!" cried the little maid, and she again put her arms about the housekeeper's neck. "I feel all broken down after my trance work. I know I help Hiram out of the puzzles he gets into, but I won't help him always."

The usually unsympathetic face of the housekeeper grew soft and she smoothed the child's hair, saying kindly:

"He won't tax you to guide him through the maze much longer, for Hiram intends to retire, and we shall not be bothered by that which bothers him now."

"That will be fine!" cried the little one, clapping her hands. "I will wait patiently for that time. Will it come very soon, Parker?"

"Before long I hope, for your sake, child."

Mellie shut her eyes and smiled with anticipation, then she fell back upon the pillow, sinking almost at once into a deep sleep.

Hiram Hawk's housekeeper stole away on tiptoe, and passing from the room opened a door which led her into a hall.

At the end of this corridor she found another door, which she opened with a key, emerging into a darkened room which, from its location, must have been on the other side of the double house.

She had barely shut the door behind her when a noise told her that the room was already occupied, and a figure rose from a chair and stood before her.

"You are back, Shamus?"

"Of course I'm back and I've been taking a little rest."

The light was turned on enough to enable Parker to see before her a young man with a thin face and eyes full of watchfulness.

He was decently clad, his clothes being dark and close-fitting and about him lurked a restlessness which rendered him a trifle nervous.

"You went out after no one this time. You should have been here a few hours ago."

"Did the master want me?"

"No, but I did."

"You, Parker?"

He looked curiously at the woman and took a seat at the table, watching her, while she still remained standing.

"I wanted you, I say. I had work for you. Hiram had a caller who went off before the master came home."

"Ten to one that I saw him."

"You did?"

"I'll tell you how it was, Parker. I was nearing home when I encountered a man who came from toward the house. At once I said to myself that he had been to see the master. He was a good-looking person, with a grayish beard that shone like silver, in the sunlight, and he wore gloves."

"The very man, Shamus!"

"Really?—and he was to see Hiram?"

"Yes, but Hiram didn't get home until afterward."

"That was too bad. But, I tracked the man, all the same."

Parker was curious.

"Where did he take you to, Shamus?" she inquired eagerly. "That man may prove an important personage in the near future."

"I think he's that, now," smiled the young man. "Is Hiram home now?"

"He is not."

"Where did he go?"

"I think he went out to look for that man."

"How does he know where to look?"

"The caller left a note on the table, and the captain found it."

"Did you see the note, Parker?"

"I did not get an opportunity."

Shamus Noodles looked across the room, and seemed to reflect a moment.

"You must remember that you haven't told me whither the man led you," she said.

"I don't think I will—not till I have seen Hiram Hawk."

This nonplused Parker a moment, but she came to the rescue of self.

"All right; keep the secret then," she snapped. "I guess I know something about the man which is unknown to you."

"Just as you say, Parker. You can't pry me open with anything like that. I am Hiram's; you know that. I serve no living being but Hiram Hawk, and where I tracked that man and what I know you can't worm from me. That's settled, Parker."

He dropped back into the chair and regarded the housekeeper with a look that nettled her. She knew that it would be of no use to plead further with Shamus, the Harlem ferret's watch-dog, and so she drew off, leaving him in full possession of the battlefield.

Noodles crossed his legs and regarded the woman a few seconds; but all at once he leaned forward in his chair and asked:

"Did you notice him particular, Parker?"

"As I notice all who come to see Hiram Hawk."

"Then, you must have seen—"

Noodles stopped as if about to commit himself and seeing this, Parker remarked:

"You needn't ask me if I noticed his right hand."

"No one asked you anything about that. However, you intimate that there was something peculiar about it. Now what was it, Parker?"

"It lacked a finger."

"You're quite sure of that, are you?"

"What are my eyes for?" demanded the housekeeper, a little irritated.

"Which finger was gone, Parker?" he asked.

"The little one."

"Clear gone, eh?"

"I would say so."

"Parker, you have eyes that can see through a stone wall. You never miss anything. Now, that man has lost a finger and it is all gone. But he wears gloves—all the time. Then, how did you come to notice the loss of the finger?"

"He drummed on the table once when I was in the room while he waited for Hiram to come back, and I saw that the little finger did not move."

"But I have clearer proof than that."

"You have? Then—"

"I saw the hand ungloved! There never was a finger there, Parker."

"Well," said the housekeeper, "it matters little whether he lost that finger or never had it. I can't see what all this has to do with

any thing the master is engaged in, just now."

"You will hear of it soon. I mean you will hear from that man before long; and so will Hiram Hawk. He came to see him to-day, you tell me. He remained in the house a while and left a note on the table. Nobody comes to see Hiram Hawk except on business and generally it is business of a dark, mysterious nature."

"Hal! Do you mean that another murder mystery is to be solved?"

"Wait and see."

"I am glad that you tracked the stranger home, then."

"I haven't said that he went home," retorted Noodles. "I only told you that I shadowed him from this house. If I had been on guard when he came, and if he had met the master here, I might have received a commission to follow him. As it was, I worked on my own hook and I don't regret doing so."

Lora Parker remained silent half a minute; then she came toward the detective's spy and let her hands fall softly upon his shoulders.

"You should have seen Mellie after the man went away," she spoke. "She played for awhile and then went into a trance and drew a hand on the wall. Not only this, but she wrote underneath it the name of the man who owns it."

"You saw her, did you, Parker?"

"Of course I saw her. There's little that escapes me on the other side of the house."

"Precious little, as I am aware," answered the young man. "You're as good as a dozen weasels; you see everything, even through a glove. You don't mean to tell me that the girl wrote underneath the hand on the wall the name of its owner?"

"She did nothing less. You know she does many strange things while in her trances, but this seems to be the most marvelous of all her late exploits."

"But the name? What did Mellie write underneath the hand on the wall?"

Parker seemed to hesitate for a moment, but looking searchingly at Noodles, she answered:

"It was the name of Tilman Hoy."

Shamus seemed to start from his chair. His hands seized the arms and clutched them madly, his lips at the same time losing color while he stared at Parker.

"Mellie missed it for once," he asserted.

"That isn't the name of the man who called upon Hiram to-day."

"But she wrote the name underneath the hand which had a missing finger."

"I don't care if she wrote it under the exact counterpart of his face," was the reply. "Tilman Hoy isn't his name. It may be the name of the person he visited to-day—after dark."

"Oh, he saw some one, then?"

"He did; but I'm waiting till Hiram comes back."

"Which means that you don't intend to tell me anything."

Noodles seemed to draw within himself, and once more settled back in the chair, while Parker frowned:

"Mr. Noodles, I don't think your guess is going to amount to anything," she grumbled.

"Wait and see, woman. I tell you that we are on the edge of another dark crusade; we are going to see Hiram Hawk meet his match in cunning, for I tell you that the Man of the Missing Finger is as cute as the cutest—a match for the matchless ferret. Wait and see! Murder has been done, and Hiram Hawk, of Harlem, has a case on his hands that will baffle even him."

Parker said nothing, but turned away, and Noodles regarded her with a grim smile.

CHAPTER III.

THE SONS OF SIMON.

IN a certain district of the great city, and some distance from Broadway, stood a little house, which is destined to play a not unimportant part in our story.

At the time of which we write it wore a dilapidated look, and, with its closed windows, looked forbidding to those who were compelled to pass it day or night.

No doubt, many looked up at the little door, old-fashioned and narrow, and won-

dered who came and went across the threshold, and some who stopped and waited for some one to come out were invariably disappointed.

In front of the house, which was a one story and a half brick, with the white-wash falling off in scales, stood an old tree, planted by hands which long ago moldered away beneath the soil of the now abandoned cemetery, and near by remained the stump of its mate.

The tree reached its branches toward the house like skeleton hands, and several nearly touched the green shutters.

Let us pass the threshold and enter the place.

The nearest clock has just struck ten, and, while it is not late, a woman is preparing to retire.

This woman is a person with a history, not much of which is known to her neighbors.

Nancy Nabbs, as she is called, is five and forty, with a strong masculine face and deep-set eyes, full of penetrating powers, which has secured for her the nickname of Nancy Looker.

She has lived in the little house for years, coming and going but little, and when she has to go out she selects quiet hours and never remains out long.

The room in which she sits is a small one. The furniture is scant, but good, and the carpet on the floor is frayed at the edges and patched here and there.

All at once the woman starts and glances toward the door, which opens into a corridor, and smiles faintly as it opens to admit a man.

He comes in, a short, set person, with broad shoulders and a dark face. His beard is black and thick, with eyes of fox-like cunning; and the moment he sees Nancy he executes a servile bow and remains standing in the middle of the room.

"So you've dropped in at last?" says the woman. "I was about to go to bed."

Advancing, with a slight limp in his gait, he takes possession of a chair near the table.

"Oh, yes, I thought I would drop in, Nance. Any news?"

"Do you mean about him?"

"Well, not exactly about him, but I refer to all of them."

"The Sons of Simon never tell me anything," was the answer, with a frown.

"I'm aware of that, but you have a way of finding out some things in spite of their reticence. You told me so, anyhow, and I believe anything you say."

"Thanks, Silas! We are friends, at any rate. The Sons may play out their hand, and may strike our way, but all the same we will remain friends."

"Till death," finished the man with a smile which seemed to illumine his dark orbs for a moment.

The man called Silas sat awhile longer in silence, and then, crossing his legs, he took up a pen which lay on the table.

"You haven't been writing again, I hope?" he remarked.

The woman started.

"I may have been scribbling a little," was the reply. "I know how you cautioned me. But, it isn't likely to fall into their hands. I'll see to that, Silas."

"You don't know how cunning the Sons of Simon are. You ought to know something about them, seeing what they have already done—"

"I know," broke in the woman. "I know that the Order is powerful to-day as it used to be. But, there are only three of them left, only three, Silas."

"Yes only three—but three terribles."

"I'll acknowledge that. There is Gloved Fergus, Con the Fox, and Doctor Velvet, called—"

"Hush!" cried the man, leaning suddenly forward and throwing out his hand. "There's some one outside."

In a second the man became as agile as a monkey. He sprang across the room to the shuttered window, where he listened.

Nancy Nabbs watched him with a tremor and for a minute seemed to hold her breath.

"If I am a lone woman here I am not without weapons," she exclaimed, and opening a little drawer in the table, she drew out a revolver with which she advanced toward

the man. "The Sons of Simon may play their hand, but at the same time the Daughter of Jezebel can play hers."

"Jehul! what a woman," grinned Silas, looking over his shoulder at her. "You may have the nerve, but you must have discretion with it. Don't go out there. I don't hear any one now, but he may be close, all the same."

"Where was he, think you?"

"At the window."

"Trying to look in?"

"Perhaps; but, come; let us go back," said Silas, catching her arm; but she did not move.

"If I thought there was a spy out there, and a spy of the Sons of Simon, the police would find a dead man on the pavement!" she hissed. "I have been watched and menaced long enough, and just because I am the custodian of a secret which was not of my seeking. You know that, Silas. I did not try to get at the secrets; I had no desire to know, but a dying man forced them upon me, and for this I am hounded from pillar to post, watched day and night."

"It's bad, I know; but—"

"I suppose I must submit. I must let them haunt me and dog my footsteps whenever I move a rod from my door. It is terrible. I have thought more than once of going to the police and telling what I know."

"Which would seal your doom at once, Nancy?"

"Hasn't it been sealed?" she inquired. "Hasn't the black ball fallen upon my name, and am I not in the shadow of death this minute?"

"I am, too," was the reply. "We three are in the shadow all the time. You and I and Tilman are within the shade day and night, and while the Sons of Simon live we shall be there."

"Hist!"

With eyes on fire Nancy turned again to the window and waited there.

"The Shadow is out there!" she whispered, looking at Silas. "I heard it."

"Give him nothing for his pains; no talking, mind you."

"But, I want to see him."

"It may be Fergus, or Doctor Velvet."

"No matter; I want to see him," and she bounded toward the hall, revolver in hand, but the other, springing after her, stopped her at the door and held her as with a vise-like grip.

"Let him remain there until he wants to retire," said he. "We but shorten our time by hunting him up. Tilman may come along and frighten him off."

"Where did you leave Tilman?"

"In the Nest."

"Was he alone?"

"He was; but, what of that? Tilman is strong and cunning—"

"But no match for the foe."

"You don't know Tilman Hoy, Nancy."

The woman laughed and did not try to break away from Silas's clutch.

The man dropped the wrist, and with another glance at the window, Nancy hid the weapon among the folds of her dress.

Silas slipped out into the hall and the woman watched the door for his return. He was gone ten minutes; then he reappeared, with a faint smile on his face.

"Gone," he said, sententiously.

"Did you see him?"

"I did."

"Which one was it—the dog or the master?"

"It was the dog."

"I would have guessed that," replied Nancy. "So they are still after us? The Sons are still on our track and they know where we live."

"That has been no secret from them for months."

"True, Silas. And we are to remain here—to fall at last like sheep cut down in the shambles, like guinea-pigs shut up in a box with a cobra on the outside."

"That's putting it pretty strong, Nancy," said the man.

"Put it milder if you can."

Silas went over to the table and sat down. He was sweating; drops of cold perspiration stood out on his forehead, and Nancy Nabbs noticed that his dark hands shook.

"You've got the coward's chill, Seabold,"

she exclaimed, with a laugh. "You'll be dead before the blow falls."

"My God! what makes you talk that way?" demanded the man. "You always try to frighten me."

"Tilman would show more nerve than you have shown. Tilman is a man of more courage, and even in the shadow of the Soft Hands he never quivers."

"All men are not alike," averred Silas. "Do you know, Nancy, that our connection with you has thrown Tilman and I into the shadow? That, but for you, we would not be tracked by the shadow now, nor be hunted day and night by the hands that slay with silence and terrible certainty?"

"I know that," coolly assented the woman.

Silas looked up at her, but did not speak.

"Let me tell you what to do," she continued, coming up to him and putting her skeleton hands upon his shoulders. "Go away. Quit the city, Silas. Get beyond these shores; put a sea between you and the Sons of Simon. There are hiding-places on this earth which the eye of the slayer cannot find and where his feet will never press the grass. Get away to-night. Take Tilman with you, if he will go. Tell him I wish it. Better one than three. Better Nance Nabbs than Tilman Hoy and Silas Seabold."

The man in the chair looked into her face and held his tongue.

Nancy spoke sarcastically, but he did not care for that; he was not in a humor to resent it, and so he sat like a statue in the chair and only looked and looked.

"You heard me, Silas?"

"I heard you, Nancy."

"Why don't you obey?"

"What would you do?"

"I will stay!"

"And die alone?"

"Better one than three, I say."

"No, I can't think of that. If you say you will go, and if Tilman is will—"

"I will not go, and Tilman may not approve of what I have advised. Tilman is cool-headed and brave. He knows that he is in the shadow of the Soft Hands."

"Let's tell the detectives."

"No crime has been committed. It will be time enough for that when the blow falls."

"But they might be checked. You know what these ferrets can do, Nancy."

"Which one would you tell? There are many, Silas. Do you know a man whom you can trust?"

"I know of one. I have heard of a detective who is as brave as a lion. He lives in Harlem and they call him Hiram Hawk."

"Oh, I have heard of that human fox," asserted Nancy Nabbs, and then she thought a moment. "When the blow does fall the survivors must think of Hiram Hawk; he must know and avenge!"

Silas made no reply.

CHAPTER IV.

HIRAM HAWK'S STRANGE COMMISSION.

WHATEVER may have been written by the strange man who had called to see Hiram Hawk, the note was enough to send the detective from home without confiding to Parker the contents of the letter.

But for the lateness of Shamus Noodles's return to the double house, the man might have been followed from the door, but, as Shamus told Parker, he had been fortunate to get not only a glimpse of him, but had tracked him, as well.

Hiram Hawk with the note concealed in his pocket took a down-town car and in due course of time was landed on the Bowery.

He seemed to know just where he was to go to meet the man he had missed by being absent from home, for he picked his way along the street and at last stopped in front of an old three story building, the door of which offered to let him into a dark hallway.

The number was over the door and this seemed to correspond with certain figures which he had in his head, and after a moment's hesitation he entered.

No one apparently had seen him alight from the car and reach the spot.

The hour was early for the Bowery, for

that thoroughfare bristled with its motley humanity, and the glaring lights fell far across its stones.

Hiram Hawk mounted the steps that confronted him beyond the threshold; but, on the first landing, he stopped and appeared to listen.

It was a new place to the detective.

He found himself in a darkish place on the first landing, with a gleam of light at one end.

The interior of the building was deathlike in its silence, and the several doors which he saw seemed to have been locked for the night.

Hiram moved down the hall, and stopped at last at a door which was but one remove from the termination of the corridor.

There was a number on the door, barely seen by the faint light near by, and the detective rapped.

"Come in, sir."

Hiram opened this portal, and stood for half a second on the step.

The room before him looked like a sleeping chamber, since it had a bed but partially curtained off from the rest of the room, and near by stood a table with a chair drawn up close to it.

At first, he looked in vain for the person who had invited him in, but the next moment a man came into view, and Hiram saw an odd-looking bit of humanity.

This person might have been fifty. He looked older, but there was a certain youthfulness about his movements that put him below the half-hundred mark.

He waved the detective to a chair; then he took a seat on the edge of the table and looked searchingly at him, awhile.

"You're Hiram Hawk, eh?" he asked, in a squeaky voice.

"That is my name. I got your note—the one you left underneath the blotters on my table—"

"The one he left, most likely," was the interruption, and the speaker smiled.

"Oh, you are not the person who called, then?"

"I am not. I never call," and the queer-looking man smiled again as he leaned toward Hiram and regarded him with eyes that seemed to look him through.

"Very well. I suppose you are authorized to transact the business hinted at in the note."

"I am. You are wanted to undertake the solution of a little mystery which, as yet, has been confided to no one. You are Hiram Hawk; that is, you are supposed to be. Could you give us some positive proof that you are the gentleman I have just named?"

It was a singular demand, and one which brought to the handsome face of the Harlem man-hunter a smile.

"I know it looks like a funny request; but, you see, we have to be very careful. There must be the greatest secrecy, and not only secrecy, but an oath may be required; but, the remuneration will justify all that."

"I am Hiram Hawk, and I live in Harlem," asserted the caller. "As to proof, you see here the note which was left on my table," and he produced it and laid it before the man. "That ought to settle the question of my identity. Don't you think so?"

The note was picked up and carried close to the man's face, as if he was near-sighted, and, after studying it a moment, he shoved it back, saying:

"The note may have fallen into the hands of some one else. We must be very cautious. This is a risky business—for all concerned. The possession of that note don't prove conclusively that you are Hiram Hawk."

"Then," said the detective, "I fear you can't be convinced."

"You might try again."

The Man from Harlem seemed to think a second, and then he produced his inside pocketbook.

"Here," said he, taking from it a bit of pasteboard, which he placed at the hand resting on the oil-cloth. "Look at that. I can't go any further than this."

The strange man picked up the card and looked at it in the light.

"I'll risk it, anyhow," he remarked, gazing sharply at Hiram. "Yes, I'll assume the responsibility. You are Hiram Hawk, of Harlem. You surely must be."

"If I am not there is no Hiram Hawk."

"One of your kind's enough, I guess, eh?" grinned the man. "They say so, anyhow."

The detective did not reply.

"No one saw you come here, you think?"

"I am quite sure I was not watched. I am cautious at all times. I came down by car and took the usual precautions."

"That's all right. Now!"

The tracker of Harlem had been wondering what all this was going to lead to, and at last there seemed to be a little light on the horizon of doubt.

"We want you to take up a little matter which is in your way. We want to find a certain person who has been missing for, say, twenty years."

"That's a pretty long time to be missing."

"Better be dead, you think? Well, she has been out of the world about that length of time; but she's somewhere in this city."

"In New York?"

The man opened a little pocket map of New York and picked up a blue pencil that rested on a rack alongside several pens.

"We have come to the conclusion that she is somewhere within this circle," he went on, dextrously drawing a complete circle which took in the central part of the city. "It's a pretty good scope of territory; but you know it, every foot of it, if you are Hiram Hawk."

The detective had bent forward and was looking at the circle and what it took in.

"I say you know that territory pretty well if you are Hiram Hawk. You had to rake it as with a fine-tooth comb in your celebrated Red Dagger case. Ah, you see we know something about your work. It was a great trail, eh? running down the Red Dagger, after all the other sleuth-hounds of Gotham let up!"

"I recall the matter," simply answered Hiram.

"Well, as I was saying, she is somewhere within that blue circle. There doesn't seem to be the least doubt of it."

"Haven't you tried to find her?"

"Would we have called upon you if we had not raked the district when we believe she's there?"

"True. I seem to be your last resort."

"You are—the last resort. If you fail we fail."

The speaker leaned back and scanned Hawk with folded arms.

"She was a baby when we lost her; she's a woman now."

The detective seemed to start just a little.

"She must be a handsome woman, for she was a seraph of an infant. Twenty years make great changes, but they have given her beauty and cunning. Her mother had both."

"Is the mother living?"

"That does not enter into the present case," answered the other quickly. "You are to find the child for us."

"And you represent the gentleman who called at my house, and left the note on my table telling me to come here."

"I represent him and others," was the reply. "Hiram Hawk, you are asked to do what cunning has failed to accomplish. You are expected to find an old trail—a 'cold trail' they call it, I believe; and you are expected to know nothing but simple obedience to those who employ you."

The detective made no response, seeing which the man continued:

"Yes, sir, you are to belong to those who hire you. You are to think of nothing but this commission, and you are to hunt day and night for the person whom we want to find. Clues? We will supply you with all we have, but which, I regret to say, are few."

The man, watched closely by Hiram, pushed away from the table and opened a niche in the nearest wall by touching a button.

"Here, this is one clue," he said, coming back to the table and casting upon it a broken bracelet. "We believe that the mate to this bracelet, as it originally existed, is still in her possession. That is clue number one. Then, we believe that she bears a striking resemblance to her mother, and this is a picture of that lady."

A locket fell from the man's hand and Hiram picked it up.

"If you have raked the district within your circle," said he, "a face of this sort ought to have been discovered if it is there."

"Think you so, Mister Hawk? Really, is that your theory? Don't let such theories take root. We have raked the district; we have turned every stone in it; but we have failed. It is for you to succeed or no longer be Hiram Hawk, the sure detective of Harlem."

He watched Hiram as the detective seemed to be mentally photographing the face in the locket upon his memory, and then added:

"She must be found within six weeks. Remember that! After that time it will be everlastingly too late. We'll increase the reward. We will double it, Hiram Hawk. Think of that! The captain will double it."

"What will that make it?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, to be paid the moment we have found her and have her safe."

"You are liberal enough. She must be of great importance to you."

"She is life to us! She is worth to us more than her weight in gold. You will undertake the commission?"

"You forget that I do not know who my employers are."

"As to that they are able to pay you. Isn't that enough?"

"Are you the person to whom I am to report?"

"You will report to me though I am not the Captain. You will come hither and tell me of your success. I am always here—in this little room where I have existed for—for a long time. Here is the book, Hiram Hawk. You need utter no oath; all you have to do is to lay your hand upon the cover, like that," and the brown hand of the speaker dropped lightly upon the Bible which he had produced.

Hawk hesitated.

"You don't care to touch the Book, eh?" cried the man. "You don't want to bind the bargain with us? Very well! If the Book is not touched there is no commission, no twenty thousand in the end. You deal with men, Hiram Hawk, and we want to deal with one of our kind. The trail is before you. The Captain stands ready to pay over the coin. Produce the one we want—show us where she is and it is yours. No questions on either hand. You know now all you will ever know about us. You will never know the whys or wherefores of this strange quest. We employ none but the best talent, and we can pay for the very best. It all lies with you, Hiram Hawk. You may have had paying commissions before this, but none that ever paid you as this one will if you succeed. What do you say?"

A spirit of independence looked out of the man's eyes, and he regarded the Harlem Hawk with supreme indifference as he settled back like one who has delivered his ultimatum.

The detective thought rapidly; the most cunning brain in New York was very busy.

Then, the hand of Hiram rested on the Book.

The eyes that watched emitted a gleam of triumph and the little man bent forward, nodding slightly.

"You belong to us now!" said he with a grin. "Hiram Hawk, you belong to us from this moment, body and soul!"

"That covers a great deal of latitude."

"I know that. But the oath underneath the lid is the most terrible one you ever took. Your hand took it, but your heart guided the hand. But, find her—go out and find her and we pay you the reward and absolve you from the vow. Fail or turn against us and—Well, let the future answer."

Hiram Hawk snatched up the Book and opened it. Upon the white fly leaf was the imprint of a miniature crimson hand!

CHAPTER V.

THE BROKEN NECK.

It was, altogether, the strangest episode in the life of the Harlem Hawk, and when he found himself upon the street with the building behind him he fell to wondering what was to come of it.

"You belong to us body and soul!"

These words of the odd-looking man upstairs in the old rookery, rung in his ears and he heard them with renewed emphasis, as it were, as he walked away.

He had not seen the man who had called at the house in Harlem, but had dealt with his agent. He had undertaken to unearth one who had been "lost" for twenty years—one who had not been seen by those who wanted to find her since she was a babe!

Now according to what the man had said she was a young woman and was hidden somewhere within a certain radius covered by a blue circle upon the city map.

Hiram Hawk armed with the commission which had been sealed with a silent oath walked away with the night wind blowing on his cheek.

He took a turn toward the Battery not very far away off, and reaching it took one of the settees covered for the first time with the brow foliage of autumn.

Here and there were others like himself lying or sitting upon the benches and he was not in the humor to study their faces.

The detective of Harlem wanted to go over the events of the night coolly; he had come to the bench for the purpose of trying to grasp firmly the mystery that confronted him.

He was "the Captain's" man now. He had promised the Captain's agent to find a certain young woman, and after that to turn her over to the tender mercies of—whom?

Hiram Hawk started whenever he reached this point in his thoughts.

The man in the room on the Bowery had told him that the Captain wanted to know where the young woman was; that the finding of her meant "life" to others.

The silent oath, the red hand beneath the lid of the Book and the other surroundings of his adventure, told him that he had become the helper of a mysterious band—had actually sold himself to a League whose aim might be murder.

Hiram took but little notice of those who flitted by him.

Now and then he heard a burst of laughter, or loud words not very amiably spoken, and once in a while he would look up and for a fleeting moment take notice of a young girl who flitted by, or catch a glimpse of the night bats of the Battery.

All at once some one dropped upon the bench alongside of him.

The shadow-sport did not object to this, and with a glance at his companion went back to the chain of thought and tried to get a clue to the new mystery.

The nearest light as it sent its rays through the trees fell upon a roughly-dressed man at the other end of the bench.

He wore a slouch hat and under it was a broad face covered by a blackish beard, a little closely cropped, and high cheek-bones, Indian like in this respect.

For half a minute Hiram Hawk took in the man on the settee and dismissed him.

There were thousands like him in New York; the Battery swarmed with them on nice nights, and they overran every foot of it like troops of vermin.

But suddenly the man turned his face full upon Hiram.

He leaned toward the detective-sport and looked at him very closely.

"You're Hiram Hawk of Harlem, aren't you?" came from between the beard-buried lips. "Come, don't deny it. I've seen you once or twice and I seldom forget a face."

Hiram saw him sidle down the seat and found the face very close to his own.

"What if I am Hiram Hawk?" he said.

"It may mean a good deal to me and to another person. Your identity established, I want you to go with me."

"With you? I don't know you."

"I am not the only one you don't know in this city, I guess. Fox-like as you are, there may be others with whom you are not acquainted."

Hiram smiled at this, reflecting how true it was.

"I am Silas Seabold. You don't recall the name, I see? Well, there's no reason why you should recall it. Don't know as you've ever heard it. I want you to go with me."

"Home?"

"No, to the Nest. You don't know where that is, I see. Can you go now?"

"What's to be seen there?"

There was no color in the face so close to the detective's; the man's eyes seemed to emit little sparks of rage, and one of his dark hands stole from under his coat and rested on the shadow's knee.

"I don't look much like a guarantee of safety; I'll admit that," he continued smiling. "I don't look like a man who would guide you safely through a dark place, and yet I will do it. Murder! It's a hard word, but it has no terrors for a man of your calling. I will give you the first clues. They don't know anything of it yet. I am the only finder so far; the secret of his death is known to me, but the solution of the mystery, the finding of the hand that slew, must be yours, Hiram Hawk."

The light faded from the speaker's eyes and he fell back.

"Where is the Nest?" asked Hiram.

"That way," said the man, pointing through the trees. "I can take a short cut. No one knows of it yet. Will you come, Hawk of Harlem?"

"Yes."

The detective-sport rose and saw the man leave the bench.

He was not as tall as Hiram, and the shadower saw that he was much broader of shoulder and a giant when it came to strength.

"Let me slouch ahead," said Silas Seabold. "Let me get a little in advance of you for reasons. All you have to do is to keep me in sight and when I dodge into a doorway you'll find me waiting for you just inside."

He started ahead with a slight limp which the detective observed and in a little while Hiram was following him.

A man like that was not difficult to keep in sight and in a few minutes the Battery with its motley inhabitants was left behind, and the shadow of Harlem saw no one but the limping man before him.

It promised to be a long journey, when suddenly Seabold turned into a short street with a sudden look over his shoulder, and the following second he lodged into a hallway and vanished.

Hiram Hawk kept on until he reached the door.

Inside he caught sight of the man who had tolled him to the spot and his arm was grasped as a laugh rasped over the bearded lips.

"You didn't think I was going to give you a blade in the dark behind the door, did you?" he chuckled. "Wouldn't do that for the world. We've too great need of you, ha, ha. The first stroke has come and you must stand between us and the next one. But come up to the Nest. I'll show you what I've discovered there."

The two went up a dark stairway to find another and yet another above it, and at last Silas Seabold stopped at a little door which he opened.

There was no light beyond the threshold, but he struck a match on the jamb and turned to the detective.

"This is what we call the Nest," said he with a grin. "Here's where Tilman roosted. Tilman's here yet."

The flame of the match by this time had been communicated to a gas-jet and the whole interior of the cramped chamber was revealed.

Hiram Hawk saw at a glance that "Tilman" was at home.

Occupying a chair which was tilted against the dingy wall was a man almost the counterpart of the one who had guided him to the Nest.

Both men were dressed alike and both had dark faces and beards of the same hue and trim.

But he saw at the same glance that the man in the chair was dead.

"This is Tilman and thus I found him an hour ago," said Silas Seabold. "I looked in upon him after coming from Nance's and there he sat against the wall, asleep I thought at first; but heavens! there was in the eye the stare you now see. Tilman Hoy, you see, Hiram Hawk."

The sleek detective went forward and leaned over the dead man.

"I picked up nothing—left things just as you see them now," continued Silas. "I said to myself: 'The man hunter who comes back with me shall find things just as

the Soft Hand left them;' and I had you in my mind when I went down street, to pick you up on the Battery where I thought I would get a little nerve before I went up to Harlem."

Hiram Hawk stooped at the man's last words and picked up something that glittered as it lay along his palm.

It proved to be a black-handled dagger, with a long, thin blade, and about it was lightly wrapped a piece of paper, which, when the detective unfolded it, turned out to be a sheet of common writing paper, covered with words roughly traced in a scrawling hand.

With the dagger in one hand and the paper in the other, Hiram Hawk turned away to read it, watched closely by Silas Seabold, who was at his heels.

"It can't be a clue," said Seabold, after a moment's silence. "I don't think Tilman was killed by the dagger."

"But, it was left here."

"For a blind, yes," smiled the dark-faced man. "What does the paper say?"

Hiram turned and thrust it at the man, who clutched it as he fell back.

"This man—this trifler with a woman's heart—has met the fate he deserved. Never again will he play with love and throw its holy offering to the winds."

"BELLE NEMESIS."

Silas Seabold read the writing twice before he looked at the detective.

"Tilman killed by a woman through vengeance? Nonsense!" he ejaculated. "I've known him all his life. He never loved. He hated women, and that is a lie."

He crushed the paper in his dark hand, and threw it in a bunch against the wall.

"But, look here. Look at the initials on the dagger hilt."

Hiram Hawk held the ivory hilt in the other's face, and for a moment Silas looked at it with bated breath.

"Here are the letters 'B. N.'—'Belle Nemesis,' a confirmation of the words on the paper."

"I don't care. It is false!" roared the man. "I say that a woman never touched Tilman. They always ask over in France when they confront a murder mystery: 'What is the woman's name?' but you must not go upon such a theory in this case. There is no Belle Nemesis, but in the imagination of the person who stole up here and killed Tilman in the Nest. She exists nowhere else, I say."

"Let's see where the wound is."

The two men lifted the body from the chair, and laid it upon a couch that rested against the wall on the opposite side of the chamber.

Hiram opened the dead man's collar and turned it down. He parted the bosom, and discovered over the heart a dark slit, about which some blood had dried.

He looked up at Silas Seabold, who was staring at the wound, and whose hand immediately touched the spot.

"The dagger may have made that wound," said the bearded lips. "I don't say that it didn't, but it never killed him."

Hiram, who in early life had studied surgery—in fact, had practiced a year in a suburban village, opened the wound a mite and looked at it with a professional's eye.

"Where's all the blood that should have come from this man's heart?" asked Silas Seabold.

"There's no blood here. I see. You want me to believe that the dagger was an after play."

"Don't you believe it was? And the paper? It was written before the murder; prepared by the hand that broke Tilman's neck."

"Broke his neck?"

The finger of Seabold pointed toward the neck, and Hiram Hawk raised the head.

It was true; the neck was broken!

"You know something about this," he said, turning suddenly upon his companion.

"Do I? I wasn't here when it was done. I looked in and saw that Tilman was a dead fowl in the Nest, and then went forth to find an avenger."

"But you tell me how the deed was done; you denounce the dagger stab but a deception, and declare that there exists no Belle

Nemesis who might have taken this man's life."

"I say all this. She is a myth. He hated all women but his old mother. This man, I say, is Tilman Hoy, and you must run down the hand that slew. We rely on you, Hiram Hawk."

"We?" echoed the shadow-sport.

"Me and Nance. Good-night. Will see you later," and before he could be detained by the alert hand of Hiram Hawk, Silas Seabold was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

HIRAM HAWK AT HOME.

LEFT alone with the dead man Hiram Hawk went to work and closely examined the place called the Nest.

Silas Seabold had vanished and the old house was still.

The body on the couch was the only thing human in the room besides the detective, and Hiram gave up an hour to the most minute investigation.

At the end of this time he slipped from the chamber, and passing down-stairs went out upon the street, with the hands of his watch pointing to midnight.

He carried away with him the black-handled dagger and the paper with which the hilt had been wrapped.

These things he carefully concealed about his person, and betook himself home.

He found Parker waiting for him in the little sitting-room of the house in Harlem, and the moment the housekeeper spied the ferret she rose and came forward.

"Noodles is waiting for you," said she. "He followed the stranger, for he met him coming from the house."

Hiram understood at once, and went toward the door which led to the other side of the double house where Shamus Noodles remained on guard when not at work.

"You should have seen what the child did," continued Parker, laying a hand upon Hiram's arm. "She went into another of her trances after you went away. She went to the wall and traced there with her magic finger."

"What did Mellie write on the wall this time, Parker?"

"She drew a hand, a human hand there, and it had a missing finger."

"Like the one you say you saw while the stranger was waiting for me in the parlor."

"It must have been the same hand, but the child went further than that. She wrote the man's name on the wall."

"Wrote his name, eh? What was it?"

"I will never forget it for I looked over the little one's shoulder and saw every line she made. It was Tilman Hoy!"

Though somewhat astonished, the shadow-sport did not start.

He seemed to look away a moment, but his gaze came back to Parker who was waiting for him to speak.

"You are quite sure the name fit the hand, eh, Parker?" he said.

"Doesn't it look that way to you? Mellie drew first the hand with the missing little finger and then, to fix the identity of its owner, she wrote his name underneath. It's all plain to me; I don't know how it looks to you."

"Where is the child?"

"Fast asleep."

"Exhausted, Parker?"

"More so than I ever saw her. I carried her to bed and she went to sleep in my arms."

Hiram turned away and opened the door before him. Parker regarded him till he had closed the door, whereupon she went back to the chair shaking her head.

"Shamus was right. It's the beginning of another mystery and the little one is to be put upon the rack again. He promised me, Hiram did, that he would not try her powers much more. He sees that she is fading, that these trances are too much for her. It must be stopped, and after this mystery he must cease to draw upon her vitality."

Already Hiram Hawk had passed down the hall upon which the door opened and was at another portal.

Opening this one in turn he slipped into a dimly-lighted room to find a man asleep in a chair.

It was Noodles, the spy, and for half a minute Hiram looked at him with a faint smile at the corners of his mouth.

"This is the way he waits for me," he chuckled, stepping noiselessly across the carpet. "Parker said he was at his post; so he is, but as a sleeping sentry."

He touched the dozing man who with a sudden start awoke and seeing his master standing at his chair smiled, and rubbed his eyes.

"Been waiting, sir," said Noodles. "Came back soon after you went away and have been here ever since."

The Harlem detective leaned against the table, one of his favorite attitudes while listening to Noodles, and quietly folded his arms.

"Parker tells me that you caught sight of my visitor on his way from the house?" he said.

"Parker is right. I ran across him, and something told me that he had been here, and, thinking thus, I concluded to follow."

"Well?"

Noodles knew that he was expected to make a full report, so he crossed his long legs and settled back in the chair.

"He gave me a pretty long chase," he went on. "I never lost sight of him till I had seen him enter a building by a door that stood ajar, one of those hall doors that always stand that way, you know."

"It was on H— street, Number 667—I saw the figures over the door; but as the stairway was pretty dark, I didn't care to go up just then."

"You see, sir, you once told me not to risk my head while upon an uncommissioned trail; and, remembering this, I remained in a secluded place while I waited for him to come down again. I might have been there yet if he had concluded to sleep in that building."

"But he did not, Noodles?"

"He did not. He was in the place about thirty minutes as well as I could time him. When he came out he looked all about him and started off at a brisk gait. I was again at his heels, but he dodged into the Bowery and I lost him in spite of myself in a crowd."

Noodles looked a little sheepish as he made this confession, but Hiram took no notice of it.

"You are sure he went to No. 667?"

"As sure as I live, for I went back afterward and again saw the figures over the door."

"What did you see about the man that struck you as being peculiar?"

"The maimed hand, sir, for I suppose Parker told you what she saw."

Hiram nodded.

"You mean that you saw the gloved hand, Noodles?"

"Beg pardon, but I saw the hand without the glove."

"He was very clever to thus accommodate you."

"Bless you, he did it unwittingly," smiled Noodles. "It was this way, sir."

Before the detective-sport could reply, a rap was heard on the door by which he had entered the room, and he opened it to stand face to face with Parker.

The housekeeper was slightly flushed and she said hurriedly:

"The child's gone into another of her trances and is trying to make marks on the walls of the nursery."

Hiram Hawk sprang from the room and ran along the narrow corridor with Parker and Noodles at his heels.

The "nursery," so called by the housekeeper, was a small room adjoining her own and in the west end of the double house.

"Twice in one night of her own accord is something strange," said Parker, gasping for breath as she tried to keep up with the Harlem sport.

Hiram made no reply, but pushed open a door and then halted with his finger at his lips as he glanced at Parker and Noodles.

The room was dimly lit up by a lamp that burned on an oval table near a child's couch and over against the wall stood little Mellie in her night-gown.

The back of the trance-child was turned toward the fire and all saw her fingers move over the wall.

"You know the marks won't show on that wall," whispered Parker to Hiram.

"You are right," and slipping forward on tip-toe the shadow-sport picked the child up in his arms and turned toward the parlor.

"Are you going to test her again?" asked the woman.

"Yes. It won't do any harm as the spell is on," was the reply. "I won't draw on here life much longer, Parker. It's cruel, I know; but I am at the threshold of a double mystery and beyond it all is dark."

Parker and Noodles followed him into the parlor where he placed the child on her feet at the wall and let her fingers touch it.

A perceptible tremor passed over the little frame and Mellie seemed to shrink from contact with the wall.

"You say you are at the threshold of two mysteries?" said Parker, when the detective looked at her in a way to silence her at once.

He now laid his right hand lightly upon the trance-child's shoulder and leaned toward her.

"You are going to give her the severe test, I see," muttered the woman. "Noodles says he tracked the visitor—"

"Hush!" commanded Hiram Hawk. "Let me have my way, Parker."

The child stood at the wall a moment with the tips of her white fingers resting against it and all at once they began to move.

Wherever they went there was seen a luminous line like the trace of phosphorus on water, and all three bent forward in their eagerness to see what was being written.

But here and there the lines were faint and broken and the detective seemed to bite his lips with vexation.

"She is going to fail," said the woman. "We might have let her write on the wall of the nursery and then go back to bed."

Hiram Hawk gave her a look which effectually silenced her and Noodles laid his hand warningly upon her arm.

"Mellie belongs to Hiram," said the spy, and Parker fell back shut up like a clam.

The trance-child continued to write on the wall, leaving the same luminous line wherever her finger went; but all at once she stopped and turned her head toward Hiram with a deeply drawn sigh.

The sport of Harlem put his face almost against the wall and looked at the tracings there.

"It looks like a human head," said Noodles in a whisper.

"It is a head," replied Hiram, and he continued to inspect the fragment of the drawing which the child had partially finished.

"Take her back Parker," said he without looking at the housekeeper, and as the child was tenderly lifted from the floor and borne from the room he looked at the man at his side.

"Here, you see the head, Noodles," he exclaimed. "You see that it is the head of a young woman."

Noodles nodded.

"I tried to put my thoughts into Mellie's fingers," Hiram went on. "We must not do that much longer, for the child is fast going down. You see the head, I say. Note that it is a handsome head, or would have been if she had had strength to finish it. Mellie also tried to identify the person, for see, she has made some letters underneath the head, just as she did with the hand she drew for Parker. Can you make them out?"

The eager Noodles intruded his head before the detective's, and looked a long time.

"There seems to be a name, master," said he. "I can see the letters B—c—l—"

"Is it Belle Nemesis?" asked Hiram.

"No, it can't be that, as I make it out. Belle Nemesis? Do you know any one by that name, master?"

"Not exactly, but you seemed to be spelling out something like that."

"Wait! Here is it. By Jove! my memory helps me this time. I catch on to what the child was trying to spell. It's Belle Natterby."

"Who's Belle Natterby?" exclaimed the detective, and Noodles turned to him with a singular smile.

"Belle Natterby," responded Noodles. "By Jove! I didn't expect to give the secret away to any one. I know her, but how on

earth did you get a clue by which you could start Mellie on this trail?"

Hiram Hawk drew from his pocket the locket which he had received from the man on the Bowery, and held it before his spy.

"Is your Belle Natterby like that?" he asked.

Noodles gazed a moment, and fell back with a startling cry.

"That's Belle herself!"

"It can't be, Noodles. This portrait must be twenty years old. Don't you see that it's the portrait of a babe?"

"I see, but it's Belle Natterby, all the same. She has the same eyes and the lips—Heavens! they've tracked her down through you, have they?"

"Who have?"

"It's dreadful!" cried Noodles. "I curse this night from the depths of my heart. She's been in the shadow for years, you might say. She has been hiding from the inevitable; she is in the toils, and has been ever since I accidentally ran across her. Belle Natterby cannot be Belle Nemesis, though I wouldn't blame her for doing a little dark work if all I hear is true. They've hired you to find her, have they? Was the Man of the Missing Finger the devil who started you upon this infamous trail?"

Noodles tottered back and sunk into the nearest chair exhausted.

"You've killed the Witch of New York! Hiram Hawk!" he cried.

CHAPTER VII.

MASTER AND SPY.

THE Harlem detective looked at his spy and let him recover without further astounding him.

Had he already found a clue to the woman whom he had promised to find for the large reward offered by the odd little man of the Bowery? Had Noodles unknowingly led him to the trail after the mysterious revelations produced by the trance-child in one of her spells?

Hiram Hawk watched Noodles and saw color come gradually back to his face.

"The Witch of New York you call her, do you?" he queried, as Shamus eyed him. "I didn't know you were acquainted with her!"

"It was our secret, and I have let it out!" cried the spy. "I promised her that I would never put any one upon her trail, and here I have already broken my faith. That shows what a fool I am."

"But," said Hiram, gently, "you may be making a friend for her. I am not the enemy of women. You know that, Noodles; you have served me long enough to know that a woman's cause is always sacred in the hands of Hiram Hawk, of Harlem."

"That is true," exclaimed Noodles, his face suddenly lighting up with pleasure. "I believe that I haven't given her away to a foe. But you are looking for her."

"Why for her?"

"The child's face in the locket tells me this. The eyes are Belle Natterby's, and the chin—it is the same, as you would say if you but knew her!"

"Where does she live, Noodles?"

"I dare not tell even you, Hiram."

"Very well," said the spotter. "Keep the secret, then."

"For you to find out in spite of us? I know what you will do. You are against the girl. The possession of the locket tells me this. She has known all along that it must be in existence somewhere."

Hiram maintained his composure, but Noodles was losing his once more.

"You have seen the man who was here—the one whom I tracked into No. 667 H—street," resumed Noodles. "That man wants to find Belle Natterby. He is the secret enemy who plots the girl's destruction; he is the shadow of her life."

"Do you think so, Shamus?"

"I know it! He is not the only one. She has seen the man and his agents. She saw them on the trail, and once she was so close to them that she sweated blood in her terror."

"But why should they hunt the girl—Belle Natterby—so persistently?" inquired the detective. "What is she to them?"

"Into that secret I have not penetrated,"

was the answer. "If she knows, she has kept it from me. Hiram Hawk, if I thought you were not the hired agent of the gang—if I thought I could trust you in this as in other matters, I would take you to her."

"You have ceased to trust me, then?" with a smile.

"I don't know what to do. I dare not trust any one when the girl is in danger. I know that they are looking for her; that they have ransacked more than one part of New York for her; that they have tracked me, not as your spy, but as her friend. I have seen the shadows of this merciless set of men on stone walls and in Parks. I have found them at my heels, for they seem to know that I know where their quarry hides. Hiram, if you are for them you must dispense with Shamus Noodles from this hour."

Noodles rose and stood before his master with a look of determination in his eyes.

"I am for Belle Natterby when it comes to choice," he went on. "I stand by her to the bitter end. Noodles is no longer your spy, Hiram; he must carry out of this house the secret of her hiding-place."

The man crossed the room and laid his hand on the door.

"Just as you say, Shamus," said the cool-headed detective, watching him closely.

"You may leave behind you the best friend your friend ever had."

Noodles turned and looked searchingly at Hiram.

"I told Parker that we were on the edge of another mystery and we are," he went on. "You have been commissioned to find Belle Natterby—commissioned by the Satan of the missing finger. At last you have sold yourself to a young girl's foes."

What could the detective say?

He recalled the interview in the little upstairs room on the Bowery, the reward for the discovery of a certain person, the silent oath on the lid of the Book, and the blood-red hand on the fly-leaf.

"I must see Belle Natterby," said he.

"You see her, and in the employ of Missing Finger?" cried Noodles, with a shudder. "Not by Noodles's guidance! Not through the treachery of the wretch who stands before you."

"For me to see her may be to save."

"While you are their man? While you are in the hands of the Sons of Simon?"

"What's that?" and Hiram Hawk strode toward Noodles still at the door.

"I beg pardon; I thought you knew," simpered Noodles. "Let me out now, will you?"

"Out of my employ?—my spy no longer?"

"Your spy no more!"

The man at the door dropped his head and was silent while his eyes regarded the floor.

"If you wish it so the door is before you, Noodles," said Hiram. "I don't dismiss you. You do that yourself. If you will not take me to Belle Natterby you may deprive her of a helping hand when the dreaded shadows gather darker."

"Gods! if I could believe that!" cried Noodles. "Hiram Hawk, if you could only convince me of that—"

"Taking me to her might prove it."

Noodles came back and caught the detective's arm. His face flushed again, but in another moment wore the hue of the snow.

"I will trust you," said he. "I have never found you treacherous. I will take you to Belle Natterby, and if I betray her by so doing may the vengeance of high heaven fall upon my head!"

Hiram Hawk, eager to quit the house under the spy's guidance, exhibited no eagerness, but let Noodles have his way.

A minute later the pair were in the street, and the spy, glancing about him, sidled up to Hiram saying:

"It's a long distance. It is down in the heart of the city. If we ride we may be seen; if we walk we may be tracked. What shall we do?"

"Tak a cab and risk it. You can tell me when to stop."

They found an all-night Jehu at the nearest corner and entered his cab and in another instant were jolting over the cobble-stones of Gotham.

"When did you meet her first?" asked Hiram, as Noodles settled back in the seat,

burying himself as much as possible in the darkness of his corner.

"Three years ago this month."

"Was the meeting an accidental one?"

"Strangely so, but, as misery loves company, we became friends from the first. Belle Natterby—I don't see how you came to confound her with Belle Nemesis—has a history which I know but little about. I know, though, that she is worth her weight in diamonds to certain men, one of whom I now believe is this brute of the missing finger—this Satan of the maimed hand!"

"You are severe on him!"

"I would be more than that, master, if I had him here!" hissed Noodles, turning on Hiram with clinched hands and flashing eyes. "I'd strangle him here and throw him from High Bridge. But, as I was saying, Belle, the hunted witch, is worth her weight in diamonds to certain men."

"Do you know why?"

"You must learn that from her if you ever learn it from any one."

"That is the secret you never obtained, eh?"

"One of them," said Noodles. "They must have offered you a good deal to put you on the trail."

A smile came to the shadow-sport's face, and that moment Noodles caught sight of it in the light of a corner lamp.

"What a fool I am!" he exclaimed.

"Here I am taking you to Belle Natterby—tightening the coils about her. Stop the cab and let me out."

Hiram bent forward as if about to call to the driver, but the hand of Noodles seized his arm.

"No. I will play the Judas hand out, come what may. I am trusting in you, Hiram Hawk. The day of settlement may come between us if you betray her to him."

"If I save her, what?"

"The everlasting gratitude of Shamus Noodles—your slave through life!"

"You love the girl, Shamus."

Noodles recoiled with a sharp cry.

"Not in the way most men love women," said he, his voice changing visibly. "Not in the common-place way. I worship her, but as her friend. I can never look beyond that. The girl loves another. I stand between her and the great shadow, but here I am taking you—a detective—to her."

He said no more for several moments and the cab rattled over the stones.

Now and then Hiram caught a glimpse of Noodles's face and he saw how tensely drawn it was and how full of pain.

At last, looking out through the glass window of the cab, Noodles threw up his hand, Hiram called to the driver and the vehicle drew near the sidewalk.

They were at the mouth of an alley, but before getting out Noodles looked down the dark passage and held his breath.

Presently he opened the door and slipped out, still keeping his weasel eyes on the alert, and in a moment Hiram Hawk stood beside him.

"This way; down into this pit of blackness," snapped Shamus, pulling Hiram into the mouth of the alley. "We must not be seen here at this hour."

The cab was heard to wheel about and Hiram and his spy vanished.

There was little light in the alley; but up from its darknets, as from the depths of the Styx, came a babel of sounds that were hard to separate and unintelligible.

"You've been down here before?" said Hiram.

Noodles made no reply, but kept on until at last he caught the Hawk of Harlem and pulled him toward a building in which there were no lights.

They dodged round one end of the house and Noodles rapped lightly at a door.

"Felix will let us in," he said to Hiram.

"He sleeps like a fox, but he will hear us."

But there came no response to Noodles's raps, and the spy looked nonplused.

"You must sound the signal a little louder," whispered the detective sport.

"He never slept as sound as he does to-night," replied Noodles. "I fear the worst. Here is a window. Let's get in that way."

A man who has any secrets to guard locks windows as well as doors, Shamus.

Without replying, Noodles went to the window near the door and tried the sash.

He gave vent to a startled cry as it yielded to his efforts, and he fell back, dropping the sash with a crashing noise.

"Something's wrong in there," he exclaimed, the next minute savagely attacking the window, and Hiram Hawk followed him into the house.

"There! don't you smell it?" he cried. "That strange odor? We are too late, Hiram Hawk!"

The detective had struck a match, and by its light had rushed across the room to a door, which he burst open.

A strange, almost overpowering smell filled the room, which increased in intensity as they advanced.

"Look! For heaven's sake, look!" gasped Noodles, stepping just across the last threshold. "Here's Felix dead in his chair, and yonder lies Belle, the Witch of New York. You won't get Missing Finger's reward this time, Hiram!"

Already the clue-finder of Harlem had reached the old man, who was bound in an arm-chair. A glance told him that he was alive, but unconscious, and then he raised the girl, who lay on the floor.

"Not dead by any means, Noodles," said he. "They will come out of this stupor all right, and we will know all."

Noodles nearly dropped his match in a paroxysm of joy.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HUNTED BEAUTY.

HIRAM HAWK saw at a glance that the young girl whom he had picked up was prepossessing and sylph-like in figure.

So this was Belle Natterby; this was the girl in the shadow, and the person whose secret Noodles, his spy, had tried to guard so well.

The man in the chair, gagged and bound, was old and weazen-faced. He had the features of a Jew, and his skin was dark and like old parchment.

"I don't care so much for Old Felix," said Noodles. "Let him go and attend to the other one. She isn't dead, you say? Heaven be praised! We may learn who did this—who made this swoop, you know."

A little water applied to the young girl's face brought her back to life, and she opened her eyes and looked wildly around.

The face of Hiram Hawk was strange to her, and she fell back at sight of it, to have her fears allayed in a measure when she looked at Noodles, whom she recognized.

"Is he dead?" asked Belle Natterby. "Why don't you attend to him? He knows more about this than I do."

In another moment Felix had been taken from the chair, and was breathing in gasps as he watched those who had him in charge.

Noodles watched the old man's attempts to catch his breath with undisguised scorn, and in a short time went over to the girl, whom he reassured in tones calculated to disarm her suspicions regarding Hiram.

"Where is it?" suddenly cried Old Felix as he tottered from the chair and essayed to make his way across the room.

"They have robbed him," said Belle. "They must have taken something precious, for see how he trembles as he tries to find the secret button in the wall."

The dark hand of the old man found it at last, and pressing it a little niche was revealed into which he thrust his hand.

"They didn't get it!" he cried, drawing forth a small package which he held up triumphantly to the gaze of all. "No, they didn't plunder us after all, dear."

"What does the package contain?" asked Noodles with a glance at the girl.

Belle Natterby shook her head.

"Something very dear to him," was the reply. "He watches the concealed door like a serpent, and I suppose I would be struck down if I dared approach the spot."

"But what do you know about this affair? Who plundered the house and bound Felix in his chair?"

"It all seems a dream to me. I was dozing on a sofa in the adjoining room when a hand was laid on my arm and I saw a masked man bending over me."

"Get up and tell what the old rat will not," said he and I was dragged into this room where I found Felix tied in the chair and speechless as I could see.

"I refused to tell them that that which they probably wanted was hidden in a niche in yonder wall, and after choking me I suppose they went off."

"There were more than one, then?"

"There were two," said Belle. "One was an agile looking man, tall and well built; but the other was short and strong. It was the short one who roused me."

"Did they carry anything away?" queried Hiram.

"As yet I have missed nothing. They did not appear to be common thieves. I don't know what Felix thinks about them."

"They were Satan's children," grated the old Jew, as he came forward, his little sunken eyes emitting flashes like sparks of light. "They came here to find something which fortunately escaped them, and I am safe for a time at least. The next time they come to look for it I will be prepared for them and they won't get beyond the door."

Hiram Hawk who was looking searchingly at the girl reclining in a chair now almost wholly recovered from her startling experience was struck by the resemblance between her and the baby face in the locket.

He had no doubt that he stood face to face with the grown image of the child, for she had the same eyes and the exact chin, as Noodles had declared.

"Why does this man look at me so?" inquired Belle with a smile and a glance at Noodles. "Who is he, and why have you brought him here?"

"He is my friend and yours as well, though he is a detective."

"And you have fetched a man of his profession to see me?" and the fair one shrunk from Hiram with a visible shudder. "I thought, Shamus, that you would exercise more caution than this, for you know how I am in the shadow."

"Shamus has told me," interrupted Hiram softly. "He has told me that you are in the toils and I tell you now, Miss Natterby, that Hiram Hawk will do nothing to tighten the coils around you."

"That's business!" cried Noodles. "I guess I haven't made any mistake in fetching him to see you. This is Hiram Hawk of Harlem, my master and the king of spotters."

Hiram turned away, leaving Noodles to still reassure Belle Natterby that his presence in the house did not mean additional evil to her while he turned to Old Felix.

The little Jew fixed his eyes upon the detective as he took a seat near him.

"They came down upon you unexpected, eh, Felix?" he said.

"Ay, didn't they, the Philistines? I wasn't looking for them and the first thing I knew I was in their toils. But you see they didn't find what they came for, so, after all, the victory is in my hands."

He ended his last words with a chuckle and looked at Belle with a glance of joy.

"You must have enemies," continued the detective.

"Who has not?" quickly answered the Jew. "Show me a man who has no foes at all and I will show you a strange creature."

"But these men must have known that you have the treasure."

"They have been looking for it for years. It has passed through many hands to fall at last into mine, and I have guarded it with all the caution I knew of."

"They would not kill for it?"

"Wouldn't they? They will not kill until they discover that they cannot get it by any other means. Then look out. This old throat of mine will not stop them, and this old heart will stop beating if they cannot get the treasure any other way. They will kill the child, too, if she stands between them and success. You don't know the Coil."

"The Coil?" repeated Hiram, looking into the old man's eyes. "You have a name for them, I see, and it suggests a band of ruffians."

"It is more than that. Mr. Noodles over there has another name for them ha, ha! but never mind; one name is as good as another so long as it fits the villains. But you haven't come to help them against us?"

Hiram assured the Jew that he had not, whereupon a gleam of satisfaction lit up the old man's eyes.

"So that is Belle Natterby?" said the ferret to Noodles as they emerged from the alley soon afterward.

"That is Belle—not your Belle Nemesis, but our Belle Natterby, Old Felix's charge, and the girl in the shadow of the dreaded Soft Hands. The attempted robbery perplexes me, for if they come after what was concealed in the wall they certainly failed to accomplish their ends."

"They may come again."

"Then Belle must not remain where she is!" cried Noodles. "You have seen her, Hiram. Isn't she worth saving?"

"She is certainly beautiful."

"Worth her weight in diamonds! That is the girl for whom the Sons of Simon have offered you twenty thousand dollars. This is the prize they want."

Hiram Hawk was silent for a moment.

"I did not question her about the secret of her life," said he. "I did not think it worth while after what you have told me. The future may reveal the motive that renders those men seekers after Belle Natterby."

"That depends. It may and it may not. I am convinced that she knows naught of the real cause of this persistent hunt. All she knows is that she is in the shadow of death—that as long as she lives with Felix, and she can't break from him, she will be hunted by this set of merciless human tigers who have made this city their lair. I am her friend through thick and thin, though she has a lover against whom no other man can make headway. You have told me, Hiram, that you are expected to unearth Belle Natterby. You have sold yourself to her secret foes; but you must break that oath."

There was no answer.

Hiram Hawk was looking down the street and his face seemed to grow hard and determined.

"Noodles stands by her—remember that; even against you, Hiram," continued Shamus. "That fair girl is not to fall into the hands of the Sons if he can help it."

The Harlem detective glanced at the face near his, and saw how resolute it was in the lamplight.

"Will you go back home?" suddenly asked Noodles. "I am going in that direction, and here I will turn off for that purpose."

"I will see you by and by, Noodles. But watch the double house with the eye of a hawk, and tell Parker to pay strict attention to Mellie, if she attempts to trace on the wall."

Noodles looked again at his master, a if trying to read his inmost thoughts, and then bounded away.

Hiram Hawk looked after his spy a few seconds and then tramped on.

Five minutes later he heard a rather heavy footstep behind him and when he looked over his shoulder he caught sight of a bearded face that came close to him with a grin of recognition.

It was Silas Seabold.

"It's pure luck, nothing else!" exclaimed the man, the limp vanishing as he came up. "You've been on the trail, haven't you? That's good. They've found Tilman, the police have, and the body has been removed. They know that the neck was broken, but they don't know anything about the dagger and the paper which was signed 'Belle Nemesis.' Ha, ha, that's all fudge, as I said at the time. There is not such a creature. She exists only in the fertile imagination of the real murderer. But come with me. I am going to Nance."

"To Nance?" echoed Hiram. "Where is Nance?"

"Nearer than you think. I want you to see her. She may prove a factor in this hunt of yours, for I've told her that you are going to sift the death of Tilman to the bottom and bring to light that which is dark and hidden."

Hiram Hawk followed the man who limped away, and in a short time they drew up in front of the little house to which we have already introduced the reader, and Silas entered with a pass-key.

He pushed on to the parlor and opened the door, saying in a loud voice that "Nance" would come down in a minute.

Even as he spoke a footfall was heard and the next moment a woman entered the room,

stopping short to look at the detective who had turned at sound of the step.

"This is the man," said Silas, waving his hand toward Hiram as he confronted the woman. "This is the Hawk of Harlem—the man who must find and avenge."

Nancy Nabbs with a curious look beaming in her eyes, leaned forward and for half a minute looked the ferret over from head to foot.

"This is Hiram Hawk, eh?" she exclaimed. "You have told him all you know, have you, Silas?"

"Not yet. I fetched him hither so he could hear it from both of us."

A smile came to the woman's face and she pushed a chair toward Hiram who sat down.

"You know that Tilman Hoy is dead; you have seen the body and you know that the neck was broken, though Silas tells me that a dagger and a paper were found on the floor. In a little while the news of the death in the Nest will be all over the city. A man found dead in a house with his neck broken! It will puzzle the detectives. It will nonplus the ferrets of Gotham; but no one shall have the real clue but you, Hiram Hawk."

"That's right; no one but this man, our avenger!" said Silas.

CHAPTER IX.

DONE IN THE DARK.

It was true, as Silas Seabold told the Harlem tracker, that the police had discovered the dead body of Tilman Hoy in the secluded room in the Nest.

It was found soon after its inspection by Hiram Hawk and after a brief investigation was removed to await the action of the coroner who after viewing the remains decided that they should be taken to the Morgue.

About the time of the detective-sport's visit to Nancy Nabbs, under the guidance of Seabold, a man entered a small room on the Bowery and seated himself at a round table.

The jet that burned over the table revealed him as a person of fifty, well preserved and strongly built.

He wore an iron-gray beard and had a pair of penetrating eyes which at times seemed to get a softer light as if their owner's thoughts ran in gentle channels.

He looked like a man well to do in the world, with little or nothing to trouble him, and he proved this by taking a cigar from a morocco case and lighting it.

He pushed his chair from the table and elevating his feet upon the edge, began to enjoy a smoker's *siesta* as the wheels of white smoke chased one another toward the ceiling.

He sat thus until the cigar was smoked almost to his lips when he cast it aside and rose.

The room was close and illy-ventilated, for he crossed it and opened the window in hopes of catching a breath of fresh night air.

Instead of falling back to his chair he remained standing at the window, looking half idly down into the street.

The Bowery at that hour was full of gay life and crowds moved hither and thither, while the man at the window watched the street with a half smile at the corners of his mouth.

Suddenly he seemed to start and the next second he was close to the window, but was standing in such a position as to prevent his face from being seen by any one below.

The cause of his distraction was soon apparent, for a little man, after a glance at the window, entered the building and ran up the stairs to the floor where the bearded man was.

In another minute the door was pushed open and the person who had come entered the room.

"I saw you, Con," said he at the window as he turned away.

"And I saw you at the window, too," smiled the other, a wiry looking person very thin and perhaps thirty-five.

"You were coming in anyhow, eh?"

"I suppose I would, but your presence at the window changed my mind."

"It's all right. I want to see you, any-

how. Fergus isn't here, you see, so we will talk."

The thin man leaned against the table, refusing the proffered chair, and quietly folded his arms.

"You weren't followed, of course?"

"I guess not. I was on the trail myself, not being tracked."

"Who were you looking after, Con?"

"The young man from below; the girl's beau."

"Just so. And what brings him to this part of the city?"

"Really," answered Con; "really, Captain, I didn't inquire, though, if I had not seen you, I might have found out."

"Where did you run across him?"

"On Broadway."

"When?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, as he usually is."

The eldest nodded.

"You were at his heels, you say? That is good. If I had not drawn you up here you might have made a discovery."

"I won't say what I might have done. As it is, he has escaped me."

"Let him go. You may be able to pick him up again to-night. He may hover in this vicinity, and when Fergus drops in both of you may go down and look for him."

A little silence fell between the two men, and the one called Con appeared to wait for the other to proceed.

"You have seen the last newspapers, haven't you?" he asked at length.

"I picked up one awhile ago."

"And read it carefully?"

"No, there's lots in it which I didn't see. Didn't care to go through it, Captain. I was looking for an item, you know."

"But didn't find it."

"Didn't I?"

"What, you found some mention of it? Let me see, for I see you saved the item."

The speaker reached out a hand, and the other shook his head.

"I didn't dare cut it out. It might have excited suspicion."

"True. It was there, then?"

"It was there."

The gloved hands of the late smoker drummed lightly on the table.

"Con, I want you to go to the Nest," he said.

The other seemed to recoil from the table. "Go to the Nest?" he echoed. "Don't you know that the place is doubly watched now?"

"I don't think it is," was the reply. "You must go to the Nest—no matter if it is doubly watched, as you fear."

"What for?"

The other one drew from his bosom a little glove which he threw upon the table.

"You see that, don't you?"

"I'd be blind if I didn't."

"It isn't hard to conceal it about your person. You can stick it into your vest pocket."

"Or conceal it in my hand, thus," and Con picked up the glove which was a woman's and closed his fingers over it.

"That's good," smiled the bearded one.

"You can even hide it in your hand. You will take it to the Nest."

There was no reply.

"You will make your way to the room lately occupied by Tillman Hoy, and will there secrete this glove, but not very closely, mind you."

"Oh, you want it to be found, eh?"

"That's it exactly. Throw it under the bed, or fling it into a corner where there is some clutter, for he wasn't over cleanly. Anyhow, leave it there."

"In the room where—"

"I've designated the spot," was the interruption. "You know what to do."

"The orders are plain enough, Captain."

"Then go and do your duty."

Con looked at the cool head at the table and stood erect.

"What if I find the room watched," said he.

"You will wait till it is not watched so closely. You must leave that glove in that room before morning."

"It shall be left there."

A slight movement of one of the gloved hands motioned Con from the room, and in

another minute he was on the staircase outside.

"Never lived a cooler comrade than the Captain," said he to himself. "Never lived a man who plays a hand with the nerve that he plays the one we hold. He is more than master. He is too much for all those who are against us now and who will be in the future. He's all nerve, the Captain is; and if there was an empire to be won instead of three cool millions, he would win it just as easy."

With this he went down toward the street, gliding along the wall on the right of the steps and at last reaching the door which led to the sidewalk.

In the light of the nearest lamp Con stopped and glanced upward at the window.

The face was there again—the cold, impassive look of "the master," as he called him, and with a slight wave of the hand to indicate that he was off he vanished.

With the little glove concealed in one pocket he brushed his way down the Bowery, pulling out of crowds when they became too dense, and avoiding others that threatened to detain him.

"I'll do it if it takes my teeth," he muttered. "I have till morning to salt the spot, and it shall be salted to the captain's notion. It may not be watched very closely, if at all, though these ferrets will try to outdo themselves; but the glove must be taken to the Nest and left there, and I'm to do it."

Half an hour later Con might have been seen in the neighborhood of the scene of the new mystery and there he became more cautious.

The street, a rather quiet one, was almost deserted while the hour was not late, and he approached the Nest with his eyes on the alert.

Nothing told him that the house was watched.

He glided into the hallway, stopping when once inside the door a moment to look round, and then he began to ascend the stairs.

On the first floor he was more cautious than ever, but after a while he turned up at the door of Tilman Hoy's room and turned the knob.

As he more than half expected, the door was locked, but this did not deter him. He fumbled in his pocket and produced a little steel wire which he inserted in the lock, and after a twist or two dextrously given, opened the door and shut it behind him.

The room was dark to Con.

The jet which blackened the wall at the end of the hall did not illumine the apartment, but he groped his way around the nearest wall until he found a bed, when he stopped.

"No matches here," said he to himself. "I am to exercise the greatest caution and a match might spoil the whole affair."

Around the bed he went, hardly hearing his own movement so fox-like it was, and at last he stopped in one corner of the room where his feet touched a lot of paper and rags on the floor.

"The very place!" exclaimed he. "This is better than eyes. I have eyes in my finger ends to-night and they must see for me."

He stooped over the pile of trash and pulled the glove from his pocket, then with a quick motion buried both hand and glove in the pile to withdraw the former empty.

It was done!

The commands of the Captain had been obeyed to the letter and he was ready to depart.

Con moved round the bed again and reached the door.

"It's all right," he chuckled. "The Captain couldn't have done it better himself. We three against the world! They can't beat the Sons of Simon!" And he opened the door, and after crossing the threshold, pulled it to and crept away.

He might have paused at the door and listened, but he did not.

He might have stopped in the dimly-lighted corridor and glued his ear to the portal he had just closed and relocked, but he never thought it necessary.

He found the top of the stairs and went down to the street; he vanished chuckling over the success of his scheme, and no one seemed the wiser for the invasion.

If Con had remained at the door for a full

minute—if he had been more suspicious than he was—he might have heard a slight noise in the room of the murder, and, after awhile, have seen the glimmer of a light through the dusty transom.

If he could have looked into the room with the eyes of an owl, he might have seen a figure slip from one corner and feel its way across the room.

"Who was it?" said a low voice. "I heard the door open and then some one in the room. I heard the sound go round the bed toward the other corner. And then it came back, the door opened and shut, and footsteps went down the steps. Some one was here in the dark. Dare I strike a light?"

The flame of a lucifer flashed up and revealed a long, dark, effeminate hand, and beyond it the tensely drawn face of a woman, not beautiful as female faces go, but full of resolution, almost tigerish.

CHAPTER X.

THE FINDER OF THE GLOVE.

A SERPENT-LIKE gleam burned in the eyes of this creature as she bent toward the little heap with the match in her hand. She seemed eager to discover what had brought the man to that corner of the room, but the match did not reward her, for she saw it go out without finding anything that pleased her.

"I might have struck the match while he was here and faced him," she said aloud. "He came like a thief and went like one. I might have seen his face if I had had but the nerve to unmask him. But never mind. I will know who he was and what brought him to this house."

Again she looked at the heap of paper and rags, and even ran her thin hand among it, but withdrew it empty.

The glove was there yet, to be found, probably, by the very person for whom it had been left.

The woman in the room of crime rose and lit the gas, but she did not let it burn high.

She fell back and took another survey of the place, saying to herself:

"He did not leave a trail behind. Like the snake that floats on the water, he left no marks by which he can be followed. But he came for a purpose, and, that purpose accomplished, he steals away to bide his time."

Once more, it was for the third time, she went over to the corner, for she was not willing to let it alone.

"He stopped here—in this corner, for I heard him," she muttered. "Here he remained a moment and I thought I heard the rustle of paper here."

She now ran both hands into the heap and scattered it at her feet.

At once a cry fell from her lips and the next instant she was looking down at the glove which had been swept to her feet.

"Was this it?" she exclaimed, holding up the glove and looking at it from all sides. "Did he leave this in the heap? Certainly this clutter was ransacked by the keen ferrets of the trail; they would not leave such a spot as this overlooked. Did he come back to place this glove in the heap?" and she laughed, showing her teeth in the cachinnation.

She rose and walked to a spot underneath the jet and began to turn the little glove over and over in her hand while her eyes looked at it with the greatest care.

She even tried it on her hand, but it was too small, and she soon gave up all attempts to put it on.

"They couldn't hang me with this glove," she said, desisting. "I never could get it upon my hand. And the man who brought it hither—it never belonged to him."

She looked at the black buttons of the glove, saw that they had done service, and then held the glove between her and the light.

"I wonder whose it was and why he hid it in the dust-heap," she went on. "I might put it back and help him play out his hand. No, not that. It should fall into the hands of the mystery sifters, and they might run the murderer down. But why am I anxious to see the red hand caught? What was Tilman Hoy to me? Ay, indeed, what was that big broad-shouldered lout to—letty Stokes?"

She flung the glove upon the table and looked at it with a smile.

"Lie there till the detectives come back," cried she. "They will find you and wonder who flung you there. They will pick you up and then try to evolve the truth from your silence. But I might drop it among the shadows of the human trail. I know a good many of them and not a few know me."

She snatched the glove from the table and turned out the gas.

"They would want to know why I came to this house if I took the glove to them," she went on. "I would have to tell them that or a lie. They would cross-question me and I would find myself in a bad box, so I'll let it go. Some day I will know who sneaked into this room to-night; before long I will stand face to face with the man who dropped the glove into the dust-heap; but I'll take it with me."

Letty Stokes, as she called herself, hid the black glove in her bosom and turned away.

"They wouldn't believe me if I told them that I came to Tilman Hoy's room to see if they had taken the body away. They would ask: 'Don't you read the newspapers? Don't you know it is at the Morgue?' and I wouldn't be believed, no matter if I told the truth a thousand times."

She shut the door carefully after her as she went, and then tip toed to the steps, down which she went making but little noise between the top of the flight and the street.

"Why not drop in and see Nancy?" she said half aloud underneath the gaslights. "I haven't seen her for a month and if she hasn't moved I know where to find her. Nancy, I'm not the woman I used to be when you came to my little house in Hester street and asked me if a secret told by a dying man wasn't the most dangerous kind to keep. I'm Letty Stokes yet, but you don't know what has passed between Tilman Hoy and me—Tilman Hoy, the man now at the Morgue awaiting burial in the Potter's Field!"

The woman with the glove hurried rapidly from square to square, as if eager to reach her destination and at last she ran up the steps in front of Nancy Nabbs's plain house.

She rung the bell a little nervous-like and fell back with a little cry when the door was opened by Silas Seabold.

"Is Nancy in?" asked the one on the steps.

The man leaned forward, looked searchingly at the woman who confronted him and suddenly drew back.

"By Jove! you're Stokes, aren't you?" he cried.

"It took you an age to find out, I think. Is Nancy in?"

"Yes," and Silas clutched Letty Stokes's arm and pulled her forward. "We've just been discussing you and—Come in and settle the question."

Wondering if "we" included more people than Silas and Nancy Nabbs, Letty allowed him to conduct her to the little room to the right of the hall, and when he threw open the door and she got a glimpse of the chamber beyond, she stopped as if struck with fear and clutched the jamb of the portal.

"Here she is now—the very woman I've been telling you about!" cried Nancy Nabbs with a glance at the man who sat at the table with his hand on the cloth. "This is Letty Stokes. Did you catch her at the door, Silas?"

In another moment Letty was pushed forward, but she would have fled if Nancy had not sprung forward and nailed her with a grip of steel.

"This man won't hurt you if you're smart," she said in undertones to Letty. "He's been here an hour and we've been telling him what we know about the Sons of Simon."

At this Letty lost color and looked again at the stranger, who was Hiram Hawk of Harlem; but she was pulled across the carpet and pushed into a chair by Nancy Nabbs.

"He's one o' them, Letty," she explained. "He's one o' the thief-takers and a mystery-sifter—just the man we need now."

Letty leaned back in the chair almost out of breath and looked at the Harlem ferret.

Hiram Hawk waited for her to speak but

meantime he looked her over as he did all with whom he came in contact.

"He can't expect me to tell him anything new if you two have been at it for an hour," smiled Letty, looking at Silas and Nancy. "I can't give him any clue even if I cared to. You must do that."

"But you know Letty how Tilman was shadowed. He's told you, no doubt, because you was a little closer to him than any one else—"

"No closer than you were, Nancy," was the interruption. "You must understand that you and Silas here and Tilman formed a little trio that wanted to get the best of another three."

Nance glanced suddenly toward Hiram Hawk and smiled faintly as she dropped the lid of one eye.

"But if all this is true, none of us bore exactly the same relation to Tilman Hoy as you did," remarked Silas.

The woman addressed would have left her chair if the skinny hand of Nancy Nabbs had not closed on her arm.

"It's true, Letty, and you know it. Silas tells the truth and this man here—Hiram Hawk of Harlem—already knows who you are."

The lips of Letty Stokes met half madly at this, and she shot Nancy a cruel, vindictive look.

All at once she fell forward on the table and buried her dark masculine face in her hands.

Both Nancy and Silas looked from her at Hiram Hawk and the former touched the detective's hand.

"It's coming; just wait," whispered she. "Letty will tell you what she knows by and by. Let her have time."

For five minutes the woman with her head on the edge of the table did not move. Those who watched her could see that she was laboring under great mental excitement and that she was breathing hard between her sobs.

"Are you going to drag me to the fore and let me get into the newspapers?" she suddenly asked, rising and looking at Hiram Hawk.

"It need not be done."

"Swear it!" she cried.

"I give you my word."

"The word of a man who works for money—who hunts down his fellow-men for a reward!"

"The word of Hiram Hawk; that is all I can promise you."

"Will he keep it, Nance?"

"As I always keep mine," was the reply and the dark face unclouded.

Letty Stokes looked at the three and her hand stole into her bosom.

"Nancy has told you who I am," she said, turning to Hiram Hawk. "I am the woman who loved Tilman Hoy, the only woman he ever loved, though those nearest him will say he hated all womankind. I came to New York after him. I have been his shadow for six months. I have visited him at all hours; I have told him that if he ever smiled upon another creature I would not hesitate to drive the dagger to his bosom. I am Letty Stokes, but he got to calling me Belle Nemesis."

"I never heard him speak thus of you, Letty," said Silas. "I told Hiram that Belle Nemesis was a myth."

"It was a nickname he gave me. He gave it to me in fun, but it stuck, and more than once I wrote to him, signing this name."

"But I don't know as I would have killed him. Tilman Hoy was a strange man. I knew all the time the relations he bore to Silas Seabold and Nancy here. I knew that he was hunted, for more than once I came across his hunters. It makes little difference what Nance and Silas have told you about him. He was a man who feared despite his assumed coolness. But, look at this."

The black glove fell upon the table and all three bent forward and looked at it.

"It wouldn't fit you, Letty?" cried Nancy.

"Of course not. Yet it was found in Tilman Hoy's room."

Hiram Hawk was holding the glove between him and the light, turning it over and over while he eyed it.

"Found in the room of the crime, you say?" he said.

"Found in the dust-heap in the corner near the foot of the bed. I found it there."

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"And you've been to the house, Letty?" asked Silas.

"Why shouldn't I go there? Who has a better right than Letty Stokes to enter the place where they found Tilman Hoy dead with his neck broken? Yes, Hiram Hawk, I pulled that glove from the dust-heap after I heard it placed there."

"You heard it placed there. Where were your eyes?"

"Where they are now; but the blackness of Egypt prevailed in the room, though I would have given my hopes of eternal life to have had at the time the eyes of the owl. The person who put the glove in the dust-heap came and went like a fox; but I heard him. You see it is too small for my hand; but—What do you see?"

Hiram Hawk, who had turned the glove almost inside out, was holding it toward her.

There were letters in India ink on the inside of the glove, and Letty Stokes, with a glance, ejaculated: "Belle Nemesis!" and nearly fell from her chair.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNEXPECTED TRAP.

"WHAT'S the matter with her?" cried Nancy Nabbs, reaching out for Letty Stokes as she reeled away with the cry on her lips. "What did she see in the glove, Hiram?"

In another moment Letty was breathing hard in a chair, and her face was white and ghastly.

"It is not my glove; I don't care whose name is there," she gasped. "It was placed there to get me into trouble. This is the work of the Three; this is the play of the Sons of Simon."

Silas Seabold looked at the detective-sport and shook his head.

"She's out of her head," said he. "She saw nothing in the glove to frighten her."

"Look for yourself," and the little thing was passed to Silas, who took it in his dark hand and leaned toward the light with it.

His face was a study while he inspected the glove, and for half a minute he gazed at it, speaking not, but without color.

"Why, it's her name here in the glove! It's 'Belle Nemesis' that put her out that way," and he passed the glove to Nancy, who clutched at it eagerly, though Letty tried to intercept it.

"Why didn't you burn it, or something else, woman?" she said, looking at Letty Stokes.

"Burn it?" dazedly answered Letty. "Why should I?"

"Your name's in the thing, and don't you see that it will go against you if these hunters of men find it out?"

Letty slowly turned upon Hiram Hawk and looked him in the eye.

"Do you believe it?"

"You found the glove in the dust-heap in Tilman Hoy's room?"

"I found it there to-night."

"You heard it concealed there, too?"

"I was in the room in the dark, as I have told you. The door opened; I heard some one cross the floor and stop in that fatal corner. When that person went out I struck a match and looked for myself. I found the glove in the dust-heap. I looked at it in the light; but, heavens! I never saw the name in it."

"Who came to the room, Letty?" asked Nancy. "Did you recognize the step?"

Letty Stokes hesitated.

"I don't like to make a mistake. It's a case of life and death, this is. One is dead, and I don't want to get into print, or into any notoriety."

"That man, though, wants the truth," replied Nancy. "Hiram Hawk must have no false clues, and nothing that can help him must be kept back now."

In another moment Hiram had taken from an inner pocket a piece of paper, which he opened, at the same time noticing the face of expectant Letty Stokes.

Silas Seabold recognized the paper at once as the same found by himself and the ferret-sport in the room of the crime.

"Look at this, Letty," said Hiram, spreading the sheet before Letty Stokes who leaned forward and fastened her eyes upon the sheet.

She did so for half a second and gave the detective a quick glance.

"It is my nick-name again!" she exclaimed. "Where did you find this work of the enemy?"

"You never wrote that?"

"Never, as I live!"

"Nor owned a black-handled dagger with the letters 'B. N.' cut into the hilt."

"Oh, I have a dagger like that, but it is at home this minute."

Silas and Hiram exchanged glances, and the latter continued:

"You are quite sure it is at home? I believe you, but it may not be there."

"Come and I will show you. I will prove that the only black-handled dagger I ever owned is at home."

She rose and looked toward the door, but the detective did not stir.

"We will attend to that by and by," said he. "Tell me what you know about the Sons of Simon."

Letty threw a hasty glance toward Nancy and Silas and took a long breath.

"I don't know much, but what I know is all against them. I know that they are three persons, that they had a grudge against Tilman Hoy; that they are playing a secret hand for three millions."

"For three millions? That's a high stake."

"And they hold the right cards, too."

"Who is the head of the Sons?"

"Tilman could have told you. I cannot."

"Do you think one of the three came to his room in the dark?"

Letty looked toward the glove on the table.

"I would say yes," she answered in low tones.

"Which one?"

"Fergus."

"Ah, you know them by name?"

"I know that one."

"But not the others?"

"I have heard Tilman talk, but not much. Nancy and Silas have heard him at great length."

Nancy Nabbs looked toward Letty Stokes as if to contradict her words, but at that moment Silas sprung up and darted across the room.

He stopped at the window like a wild beast and inclined his head forward.

"I heard it, too," said Letty, snatching at the glove. "One of them is out there now. As sure as fate—"

Hiram Hawk rose and looked at the woman, silencing her by the glance, while Nancy Nabbs leaned forward and addressed her in low voice.

"He didn't stop long," muttered Silas, looking over his shoulder and smiling at Hiram. "There he goes now, the same slouching gait peculiar to him."

"Which way, Silas?"

"Down the street. What, are you going out?"

The detective of Harlem nodded and moved toward the hall.

"One moment!" cried Letty Stokes, springing up and overtaking him just beyond the door where her hand fell upon his arm.

"What is it, Letty?"

"Be careful," said she. "They are up to all the tricks of your people. The Sons are cruel and restless. They will get the three millions, or they will know why not."

Hiram smiled at this declaration and would have moved away if the hand of Letty Stokes had not taken a new grip.

"I will lose the man who came to the window," said he, looking down at the woman. "I must not lose a clue now."

"He is cunning and fox-like if it is Fergus. He is deadly if it be Con, and if it should be the other one—the head of the Sons of Simon, you must play the coolest hand of all your career."

With this she fell back and Hiram Hawk slipped from the house and for a moment paused on the step.

In another moment he had left the habitation of Nancy Nabbs behind and was hurrying down the dimly lighted street with eyes on the lookout for the cavedropper.

Half a block from the house he saw a man quietly lighting a cigar on the sidewalk, and as he threw the still blazing match into the gutter the ferret got a glimpse of his face.

It was a cunning face framed in black by the beard that seemed to cover it, and when the smoker moved on again he had the sport-ferret of Harlem at his heels.

Hiram Hawk recalled Letty Stokes's last warning uttered with a good deal of emphasis, and, keeping behind the man, he watched him to the nearest corner which he turned.

Con or Fergus—which one was it?

All at once in the glare of a lamp that seemed to burn with unwonted brilliancy the tracked man came toward Hiram Hawk, and as they met he poked his head forward and grinned from ear to ear.

A thrill passed through the detective's nerves the moment he got a fair look at the face, for he saw that it belonged to the little man of the Bowery.

"It's luck. By Jove! I thought I knew your step and, pardon me if I have turned on you, Hiram."

He faced the ferret with scarcely a step between them, and the Harlem tracker was looking at him with a comical expression.

"Will you come with me?" continued the little man. "The last time we met, you recollect, was in my den on the Bowery. You must have been at work since. What have you discovered? But this isn't just the place for an exchange of ideas. We'll just slip down the street here and see the Captain."

"Is he near?"

"Nearer than you think," was the reply. "By the way, you haven't met him yet. That's not strange, seeing that I haven't met him myself since I made the bargain with you. This way, please," and the little man tripped away a little in advance, but at the same time sending over his shoulder a glance to satisfy himself that the Harlem detective was following.

Hiram Hawk followed his conductor to a smallish house that stood on what might be called a side street, and in another moment he had passed the door at the man's heels.

How many places had the Sons of Simon? He had seen this one in the Bowery; had taken there a silent vow to find Belle Natterby for the Band; he had found the girl sooner than he expected, and, if he should report according, the twenty thousand dollars were his.

He heard the little man lock the door behind them and in another moment they were in a small parlor which was not very well lighted.

Hiram Hawk found himself alone there and he began to wait for some one to come in.

The room was poorly furnished, and here and there on the walls hung cheap daubs which seemed to have found their way thither from a second-hand shop.

The floor was covered with a carpet frayed at the edges and sprinkled with little holes, showing that it had been pressed by many feet, if not attacked by the sharp tooth of time.

At the table in the middle of the room the detective took a chair and waited on.

No one came.

He glanced at his watch and looked toward the door.

Thirty minutes passed.

He concluded to wait another ten minutes and then stir about.

This he did amid intense silence, and at the end of the stipulated time he rose and crossed the chamber.

He gained the door and laid his hand on the knob.

The next instant he turned it to discover that the portal would not open, though he gave it a wrench calculated to try its strength and the power of the lock.

Hiram Hawk felt back almost to the table with a queer look in his eyes.

No one answered the noise he made and the silence after it seemed to increase in intensity.

"Where's the villain who tolled me hither?" Hiram asked himself amid the quiet. "Is this a trap of some kind, and have I been fool enough to enter it?"

Once more he went to the door and caught the knob madly. He gave it another

wrench and pulled back with all his strength. It seemed as immovable as a portal of iron; but all at once the ferret caught up a chair, heavy and lead-like, and attacked the door.

His blows only broke the chair and it fell dismembered from his grasp when he stepped back and saw that he had made but listle impression on the portal.

"For once in a long time, Hiram Hawk, you have been neatly caged," he said to himself. "For once you have walked into a trap deftly set for you by an enemy."

His words had an echo that seemed strange to him, and as they died away he was startled to hear the first human sound that had reached his ears since entering that room:

"Your services are no longer needed, Hiram. We have found the trail ourselves, and you die where you are!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE JUNT OF THE FERRET'S FERRET.

FOUND the trail themselves!

That meant that the Sons of Simon, if he had really been in their employ, had discovered the whereabouts of the lost girl and had dispensed with his services.

Hiram of Harlem heard these words like one who listens to his death-warrant amid the silence of the court-room in which he had been tried.

The door which had resisted him with the pertinacity of iron confronted him, and he looked at it after the voice ceased with the desperation of a man hemmed in by foes.

He was to perish in that house, just how or when was still one of the secrets hidden by the future.

He had been decoyed to the place for the purpose of doom and he was to be taken from the trail when it was getting interesting, since Letty Stokes had been injected into it, and pushed out of the way by the hands of the Sons of Simon.

These thoughts chased each other rapidly through the detective's brain.

The voice seemed to come through the solid wall, yet it appeared to Hiram, the ferret, that some means of communication existed between him and the unseen speaker.

He took a step in that direction, but halted near the wall.

"We blight your treason in the bud," said the same voice. "We know what you have done and what you intend to do, therefore we turn on the serpent that lifts its head against us and crush it without mercy."

This meant that Hiram was suspected of treachery, perhaps because he had been seen with Nancy Nabbs and her friends, and they (the Sons of Simon) thought best to remove him at once.

The imprisoned shadower said nothing, but looked at the wall in hopes of detecting from whence the voice came.

That there was another room beyond the one he occupied he did not doubt, and for half a minute he stood in the center of the room and looked in vain.

Half an hour later, Hiram Hawk of Harlem was still the occupant of that same little room which had resisted all his efforts to break from his prison.

The voice had been heard no more, and the night had dragged along toward the fringe of another day.

He heard no more sounds from the street, and the city seemed to be taking its last sound nap prior to opening its eyes for another twenty hours of life.

In another part of the city a man was watching a door with a great deal of anxiety.

Shamus Noodles was attached to the man he served.

He believed firmly in Hiram Hawk; he had served him as spy and helper for five years, and if he did not hold all the secrets that Hiram kept, it was not because he was not deserving of this great trust.

They had parted on the street shortly after their visit to Belle Natterby's home, where, with Felix, the Jew, they found her in a faint, the old man bound and gagged and the room turned topsy-turvy.

Parker had retired long before with Mellie, the trance-child, and more than once Noodles

had crept to the other side of the house, in hopes of finding Hiram at home.

A shadow of fear had settled over the ferret's spy.

A little nervous, Shamus Noodles, with the spell of his last adventure still upon him, paced the room and looked at the door, as he thought that it must open to reassure him that Hiram was safe.

But the hours dragged their slow length over his head and he saw the morning of another day approach.

"Come what will, there must be an end to this!" he cried. "I will rouse Parker and she shall put the child on the trail. I won't go out and hunt for him without it, for that would be hunting a needle in a haystack."

He bolted from the room and half a minute later rapped loudly at another door.

Noodles was on Hiram's side of the double house.

The voice of the housekeeper answered him.

"Get up, Parker," said Noodles. "You must help me find Hiram."

In another moment Parker was into her clothes, and came out looking pale and excited.

"Bring the child down to the parlor."

"She's asleep."

"No matter; waken her. She must find the trail for us."

"But, you know I haven't the control over her that Hiram has; and, besides, to rouse her out of her sound sleep—"

"Hiram is more to us than the child!" broke in Noodles, without mercy. "You have touched her with the tips of your hands and she has traced for you on the wall. Don't you recollect how we experimented with her one day?"

"But, I said then that I would never try it again."

"Fudge!" and Noodles's hand seemed to sink into Parker's arm. "This may be a case of life and death, and you must bring the little one."

Parker turned back, and soon reappeared with the gaping child in her arms, and the two went into the parlor.

Mellie was but half-awake, and for some time she baffled all their efforts to bring her out of her sound sleep.

"Place her before the wall," said Noodles. "When she touches it she may be in trim for the ordeal."

Parker did so reluctantly, holding Mellie firmly by the arm, and Noodles leaned forward, intensely excited.

"Put her fingers against the wall—there, that's it," he was saying. "Now, touch her lightly on the shoulders with the tips of your fingers, Parker, and bring your mind to bear upon hers like Hiram does."

"Well, what next?" asked Parker.

"Think of Hiram. Tell her through your thoughts that Hiram is somewhere in the city—say to her that we parted on a street at a corner where three brass balls overhang the sidewalk. She can track him from that spot."

For some time the efforts of Parker did not seem to be of any perceptible force, but at last the hands of the trance-child moved over the wall.

Noodles gasped as he leaned closer.

"I see the moisture on the wall as it follows her finger," said he in a whisper, looking up at Parker. "Let her go on. You're doing well, Lora."

All at once Mellie tottered back and fell into Parker's arms.

"I thought so," cried the housekeeper, glancing at Noodles. "I knew we were overtaking her powers. We must cease, Noodles."

Hiram's spy looked half-savagely at Parker and drew back.

"If I thought you broke the trail I would force you to try her again," said he.

"But I did not. Mellie is exhausted."

"Curse it all; she was doing well—better than she has done for months. The writing on the wall was very plain."

"What was it?"

"She was certainly following Hiram."

Parker looked at the faint moist tracings on the wall and then glanced at Noodles.

"But you see what we have done. We must not try her again to-night."

Noodles now waved his hand toward the door.

"Take her back," said the spy. "I know the street whose name she has written on the wall. That will have to do."

Lora Parker lifted the marvelous child and carried her back to bed, kissing her as she laid her down and with another look turned back to the parlor.

Noodles was gone.

She heard the door close, but the figure of the spy was already in the street, and she heard his last footsteps as they died away underneath the lamps.

"What does he think, anyhow?—that Hiram has fallen into a trap?" exclaimed Parker. "He often remains away over night and this time Shamus Noodles should wait a little longer."

Noodles was rapidly quitting the vicinity of the house in Harlem and with body bent against the rather strong wind that came from the river, was hurrying down the street.

A strange spell seemed to impel the man onward.

He walked like one mad, as if some great need quickened his gait and forced him on and on over the dimly lighted stones of Gotham, and by and by—it must have been an hour later—his figure might have been seen miles from the double house and among the shadows of several trees that leaned toward a silent house on a certain street.

With almost fox-like certainty Shamus Noodles, spy and protector, had reached the spot toward which the singular gift of Mellie, the trance-child, had impelled him.

Some men go straight to their mark like a well directed arrow.

Noodles had this faculty. Years of spying and cunning had sharpened all his wits; he knew the great city like a book, and knew where danger lurked and where the dark alleys lay like a maze of danger down in the heart of Gotham and along the slowly slipping tides.

Noodles stood among the shadows of the trees in the earliest moments of the new day.

No one seemed to see him. He stood like one of the trees themselves, so quiet was he and so statue like.

A man passed along, but did not see the man from Harlem. He nearly brushed Shamus Noodles; but that worthy never moved, but looked after him with the semblance of a smile at his lean lips.

His eyes were fixed upon a house which stood back of the trees hidden from the searching light of the nearest lamp like a nest in a shaded fork.

About this house all was still.

Over the door hung by a screw the number of the place, 988, and the eyes that lost sight of nothing had found this out.

Shamus Noodles had simply followed the trail which the trance-child had written on the magic wall.

He had treasured in his brain the scrawl which the gifted fingers had made, and in consequence of all this he stood in the shadow of the trees and was watching the little house that lay beyond.

Shamus Noodles preferred to keep watch there rather than go round the rear of the house and see what awaited him there.

Ere long day would break over Gotham and the night and its secrets would pass into history.

At last the man at the tree moved.

The door watched so long with a cat's patience opened and a man slipped out.

He stood a moment on the step and looked up and down the quiet street.

Noodles saw that he was short and heavy-set, a man with great strength of limb and endurance of muscle—in short a compressed Ajax.

"That's one o' them," ejaculated the man on guard. "That is the one who takes care of the business in the Bowery den. He doesn't roost here. He is simply in another coop for the time and—there he goes! as if his work is done in this quarter of the town for to-night."

The eye of Noodles followed this man until his figure vanished.

Then it turned to the house again and he was back at his old post.

"Where the man has been the master must be," thought Noodles. "In that house the head of the Clan must be at this hour."

He seemed to guess correctly, for ten minutes afterward the door opened again and another man came out.

"The Captain himself," cried Noodles under his breath. "By Jove! if we did take another week or two from the child we didn't fail."

He leaned forward a little to get a good look at the man who stood on the step.

He watched him off as he had done the other and turned to the house once more.

"The other one is not there. The Captain came out last. The thin man with the gray eye isn't left behind. I can go to work now."

He left his post at last; he crept to the first alley and got into the yard in the rear of the house he had watched with such cleverness and in a little while was at the back door.

For Shamus Noodles to get into the house was to exercise the coolness of a desperado.

He made his way to a door and stood there a moment trying the lock.

Not a sound came to him from any part of the house and he felt that if it was inhabited it must be by the dead or helpless.

He fell against the door at last, springing the lock and opening the portal to fall into a room beyond.

His hands which were eyes to him now, found another door, but it resisted with all the strength of a portal of iron.

Noodles struck a match, risking it at last, and held it over his head.

He found himself in a small room which had lately been occupied, for burnt matches littered the table before him.

"If this is the nest of the cormorants, by Jove! I'll search it thoroughly," he muttered. "If Hiram has been tolled to this house I will find him."

Just then a groan reached the spy's ears and he sprung across the room to hurl his body against another door which, unable to withstand the charge, gave way, letting him into a room where he fell against a chair in the darkness.

In a second he had another lighted lucifer in his hand and then he recoiled with a cry that quivered with horror.

The spy had found his master.

CHAPTER III.

EXIT HIRAM HAWK.

SHAMUS NOODLES had come face to face with a scene calculated to startle the coolest of men.

The little room into which he had fallen headlong, but where he had recovered to strike a light, was before him with its scanty appointments, and the match burning in his hand illumined it to some extent, though not enough to show him all the dark corners and out-of-the-way places.

About the first thing he saw was a chair standing in the middle of the chamber and in it, lying back like one dead, the figure of the man he sought.

Hiram Hawk of Harlem was before his faithful spy, and the moment Noodles saw him he fell back with a half suppressed cry.

Was he dead?

Had the man of many trails ended the last one in the trap to which he had been tolled by a bait as yet unknown to Noodles?

Rushing forward, the man of stealth bent over the victim of the Sons of Simon and held the blazing match close to his colorless face.

Hiram looked like one dead, but the sharp-eyed spy saw a trembling of the lips which filled him with hope.

He lit the gas and caught Hiram by the arms, pulling him up and at the same time shouting his own name, assuring him that rescue had come.

It seemed an age to Noodles before his master opened his eyes, and then the stare they threw out filled him with an indefinable dread.

"Where is it?" asked the detective, glancing about the room.

"It? I am here, Hiram, and it seems to me I dropped in in the nick of time."

"But it was yonder. I saw it burning slowly but steadily, but all the time, creeping toward me with the certainty of death itself. I saw the first spark and watched it

till the room was suddenly filled with a strange, suffocating odor when I must have sunk into the chair."

Noodles fell back and looked toward one side of the room in which direction the detective pointed.

"It was something at your feet, Shamus."

"It is here, but it is out," and the next moment the spy was lifting from the floor a bit of black rope, one end of which seemed to have been singed by fire.

"It is a fuse. Ah, the devils!" hissed Shamus Noodles. "You saw it on fire, but somehow or other the thing went out. Let's see where the explosive is."

He followed up the fuse, taking it up inch by inch as he crawled across the carpet, and Hiram saw him come toward his chair near which he stopped.

"It disappears beneath the floor here, Hiram."

The spot designated was almost beneath the table and the detective smiled grimly.

"The infernal fuse vanished beneath the carpet and the explosive must be beneath us."

"Let it be. Since the fuse is no longer ablaze there seems to be but little danger."

"No, get at the danger and see what it was," remarked the spy, and the next moment he had found a bit of iron which he inserted into the hole from which he had pulled the remainder of the fuse and the board was lifted.

"Look!" said he. "Can anything be more devilish than this?" he exclaimed, holding up to the detective's gaze a package strongly wrapped. "Here is enough stuff to blow a thousand men like you off the trail. It was fate that put the fuse out."

"Now for this nest," continued Shamus, when he had told the story of his opportune arrival, to which Hiram Hawk listened without once breaking the narrative. "Let's see what we can find here. It may be the Captain's nest, or one of them, at least."

A minute later the two men were ransacking the little house, and in one room they found a little door which was too small to admit any person to the apartment that lay beyond.

Noodles poked his head into the place, and after a survey by the light of a match, looked back to announce that it was a hole in the wall that did not extend far.

"There's nothing in here but this," said Noodles, bringing to light a basket, which seemed to be full of old letters and such material. "We won't go through this, eh, Hiram?"

"Throw it back, Noodles; but no, fetch it out."

The contents of the find were dumped upon the floor, and the hand of Hiram Hawk immediately pounced, hawk-like, upon a torn glove, which he eyed curiously.

"Gloves and bits of correspondence, probably the property of the former birds in this nest," suggested Noodles.

Hiram went to the stronger light with the glove, which he had turned wrong side out.

On the inner surface was a trace of a name, which did not seem to have suited the writer, and it looked to him like the mate of the glove which had drawn a cry of terror from Letty Stokes.

He thrust the glove into his pocket, and came back to Noodles on the floor before the heap.

"A lot of stuff. Old letters, few dated, or the dates are gone, and none signed," smiled the spy, looking up.

Hiram bent over the heap, and looked at several pieces with set teeth.

"They may be waiting somewhere for the report," said Noodles.

"True. The fiends may be listening for the sound which will tell them that I am out of the game."

"Why not let them hear it?" and Noodles, his face wreathed in demoniac smiles, bounded up and sprung across the room to replace the fuse along the floor.

"What would you do, Noodles?"

"Blow the old nest up!"

"There are sleepers in the adjoining houses."

"They needn't awaken," was the grim reply.

"But, you wouldn't destroy human life thus recklessly, would you, Shamus?"

"These men want you out of their road.

They are the same devils to whom you sold yourself, Hiram."

"Yes, but—"

"I can remove one-half of the explosive, and the rest will wreck but this nest."

"If you could convince me that you can do this."

"Let me try. With you out of their way they will play a bolder hand, Hiram. Don't you see that these men—the Sons of Simon—want you far from the trail they are making? You have worked in the dark before. Three years ago the Red Avengers thought you dead, but you proved that you were the liveliest corpse in America."

Hiram nodded at the recollection.

"Here, I have divided the explosive. I have taken more than one-half from the original package. I need not put it under the floor, but against the wall yonder. I am sure it will demolish this room, and probably set the nest on fire. I cut the fuse to three minutes. I can see the minute marks upon it."

Hiram Hawk was thinking hard while Noodles talked.

He watched his spy all the time and saw how eager he was, and at last he said:

"Make no mistake, then, Noodles. Set the package where you think it will do the mischief. Cut the fuse right and let us depart."

Noodles went to work and cut the little fuse that lay along the carpet and trained it to the package of darkish stuff which he placed against the wall.

"It's a three minute bit of destruction now," said he, glancing at Hiram as he rose from his knees. "That will give us time to get out of the trap. The back trail will be the one we'll take, and they can have the pleasure of the sound and all the pleasurable thoughts that follow it."

They left the room, Noodles the last one, coolly closing the door after taking a last look at the slowly burning fuse he had left behind.

They glided from the house and crossed the cramped back-yard attached to the premises.

In the morning starlight they stood a minute beyond the yard, and then made their way to the street, pausing in the shadow of a tree to listen a moment.

"What if the fuse goes out again?" whispered Hiram.

"I'll go back and relight it."

"That would be risky."

"I'd take a thousand risks like it, Hiram," grimly answered the cool-head. "But it won't go out. I untwisted it just a mite and saw that it was all O. K. I've dealt a little with fuses before this and I—"

The sentence was broken by a dull report, and the next instant the air seemed to tremble with some great concussion starting from a point not far away.

They looked at one another and Noodles's face was overspread by a grin.

"You are dead now, Hiram—dead in the minds of the Sons of Simon," he said.

"Wait and see," was the reply. "Daylight will tell us the truth. It is almost here."

"It will show the ruins of the nest. But look! I told you the old place would blaze. There go the flames. They will destroy you; they will incinerate Hiram Hawk, the detective of Harlem. Ah, this is luck!"

Certain sounds momentarily on the increase told the pair they must not be seen in that vicinity, and in a little time both were pushing away through the shadows of house and tree.

"You must not go back to the double Nest," said Noodles, suddenly clutching his master's arm. "Remember, you are dead even to Parker and Mellie—dead to the old house till your time comes."

"I know that, Shamus. You can go back to Harlem, but—I cannot."

"I know a good place for you. It's not overly nice; there's no parlor in the house, but it's occupied by a friend of mine and if—"

"I'll go," interrupted Hiram. "The day is breaking and we must not be seen."

Noodles led the famous spotter into a tortuous street, the houses of which the ferret recognized, for all at once he turned to Shamus and whispered:

"You're getting into Little Italy, Shamus."

"Anywhere but in America," was the reply and Noodles continued on until he ran down a flight of steps and knocked at a door.

"This is my friend's place—no parlor and no bill o' fare," he went on. "Let me see: you are my friend Hamish Holt—I had a friend by that name once, but he'll not come back to claim the name—and I can come here at any time."

The door opened and the men there saw a tousled girl of fourteen with bright eyes and a great stare in them as she looked out.

"Meela, it's all right. It's Noodles and his friend Hamish," and with this Shamus passed in followed by the detective who paused in a dingy room while the spy turned to the child.

"Where's Poco?" he asked.

"Dead."

"When did Poco conclude to go further than Italy?"

"It was a week ago, Noodles," answered the child. "He died of sudden sickness and I'm alone."

"In this place?" asked the detective.

The little one nodded, but Noodles turned quickly upon Hiram Hawk and said:

"What can be better than this? You and Meela can get along here, for she is a good cook in her way and no one will look for you here."

The Italian girl continued to look at the spotter-sport, but all at once she darted to Noodles's side and caught his hand:

"I like your friend already. He will live with me, won't he? No one has come to see me since Poco died. Ah, this is the very place for your friend if he wants seclusion."

"He will stay, Meela," and Noodles laid one finger upon his lips. "Remember, child, this man is dead, as dead as Poco, though not in the ground."

The little black eyes told them that the secret would be kept.

CHAPTER XIV.

FLEEING FROM THE SONS.

THE corpse of Tilman Hoy, after its brief stay at the Morgue, went to the Potters' Field with no one to claim it, and the sod of that hated portion fell upon the plain coffin-lid.

Silas Seabold kept aloof from the little wagon that carried the victim of the Nest to his last resting-place, and Nancy Nabbs remained at home that day.

It was getting dark when Silas came back, entering the house stealthily and taking a seat in one corner of the room without a word.

It was the day of the funeral and Nancy looked at the man for five minutes, respecting his feelings.

Silas at last looked across the darkened room and caught the woman's eye.

"You remember the advice you gave me, Nance?" said he.

"The advice to clear out—to put miles between you and the Sons of Simon?"

Silas nodded.

"Do you give it again?"

"I do. Silas, if you fear those men—if you fear the hand that broke Tilman's neck in the Nest, I do give that same advice over, and it is night again."

A lump seemed to rise in the man's throat and for a moment he looked away.

"There was a time," he went on, "there was a time, I say, when I wouldn't harbor such thoughts for all the world."

"You mean when you had nerve."

"That's it, Nance. When I had what I haven't got now—nerve."

"The death of Tilman has unnerved you. It has taken away every vestige of courage and you're a rabbit where you used to be a lion."

He held out his hands pleadingly and his lips trembled twice before he spoke again.

"It's so," he cried. "I can't fight them in the shadow of that neck-breaking hand. I'm going, Nance."

"After you have found an avenger?"

"I have found Hiram Hawk and he has promised to take the trail of the hand that killed Tilman."

"You heard what he said, for you were present."

"But, hang it all, while he hunts they may strike again."

"True as gospel, Silas."

Nancy Nabbs was strangely cool. She sat at the table looking at the man near by, and seeming to study his dark face in the light.

"This man has about him coolness and nerve. I never saw him before he entered this house the other night, but I liked him. You noticed how he listened to you and I, and how he watched Letty while she talked?"

"Oh, there's none better," answered Silas with a slight gleam of hope. "I've heard of him a long time—how he goes pretty straight to the mark and never fails to net the birds. But it's just as I have said, Nance; there's the shadow while he hunts."

"Well, you know the road out of the city. You don't have to be told which way leads to liberty."

"But I hate to leave you. You couldn't be prevailed on to go along?"

The woman shook her head.

"Not now."

"But they'll hunt you down."

"Perhaps."

"They know where you roost. No doubt they've had this house watched and they know the interior as well as the outside."

"They're cunning, all three of them. One is no better than the other; all know where I live and all are in the same game. I keep the secret they want kept forever. You and I and Tilman were with him when he died, and we three heard the last words which can wreck the hopes of the Sons of Simon if used rightly."

"It's true," and Silas's hand shut suddenly upon the edge of the table. "It's the secret that's been the bane of our lives, eh, Nance? But for it we might be happy and Tilman would not be lying under three feet of silence where the Angel will hardly find him."

Silas rose with his last words and shook himself after the manner of a dog.

The watching woman said nothing.

"I'll leave you alone when I go," said he, looking down at her.

"Of course."

"But Letty may come now and then, and the ferret will drop in to report about the case and to tell you how he is getting along."

"I don't know about that; Hiram Hawk may not be a secret-sharer. I sha'n't ask him for his links."

"No? Just like you, Nance. Very well. I'll probably save my neck by getting out of the shadow, but—but—"

He stopped of his own accord and came over to her, stooping over her chair and continuing in a whisper:

"It's cowardly. It's a shame. If I had nerve I'd stay and take my medicine with you. You never had fear, Nance. You always had courage to face what's before you; but me—I'm the coward of the trial."

"Don't, Silas. You'll lose all the grit you've got, and won't have enough to take you out of town."

"I'll let you know—"

"Don't do that. It might tell them where you are."

"Right you are, Nance. I won't write—not for some time at any rate. But you shall hear from me; and if Hiram Hawk proves the right man on the trail, why, we may meet again."

Nancy Nabbs held out her hand, but turned her face away as she pressed the one Silas placed in it, and a moment later she was alone.

He had passed from the room without another word, but she heard him stop in the hall as if reconsidering his resolution.

"It's the broken neck what did it," mumbled the woman left in the chamber. "He has nerve, but it was that terrible taking off—the silent twist in the night, the hand of the Sons of Simon—that's what did it!"

She sat there a minute longer like one in a trance, then she left the chair and went over to the window.

She thought she heard the man walk away and then she came back to the little table where she suddenly leaned forward and buried her face in her skinny hands.

No one interrupted her.

No one came to look into that little room

where the lone woman sat in her sorrow, thinking perhaps of the man who had passed out of the house to escape the shadow of the deadly hand.

If only some one would come!

Nancy paced the floor with her stony stare fixed upon the door as though she expected Silas to come back, or as though some one else, perhaps Hiram Hawk or Letty Stokes, would drop in.

As to the man who had gone away, he crept down street in the shadows of the buildings, looking back over his shoulder with fear at his heart.

He sneaked back to the little room which had been his home for a year.

It was not far from the Nest where the blow had fallen upon Tilman, and there he locked himself in.

He went through his little wardrobe, culling here and there and putting on another suit.

In the bottom of an old trunk he found a razor and with a little cold water and soap he succeeded in robbing his face of the beard which had covered it for years.

He grinned at the reflection of his face in the mirror and threw the razor back into the trunk.

After this he went out, shutting the door behind him and creeping toward the street.

The flight from the Soft Hands had begun.

Silas Seabold did not think of Nancy Nabbs now; if he recalled any one it was Tilman Hoy, the terror's victim in his nameless grave and scanty shroud.

The lights seemed to be at war with him.

As he hurried along he kept in the shadow of the tall houses and heard every sound.

Nancy had told the truth; the strong man had lost all his nerve.

"There's one being I'd like to see before quitting the city," said he. "I haven't seen her in a long time, and she wouldn't know me now; but all the same I'd like to see her again."

He went on another square when he stopped undecided.

"I might cut down this alley and reach the house," he thought. "The old man is dead, but she's there yet. I heard about his dying the other day, and Tilman said the little one would keep house in the Nest. I'll try it if all the Soft Hands in New York are at my throat!"

Silas Seabold darted down the dark street and vanished.

Twenty minutes later he turned up at a door, to reach which he had been compelled to descend a flight of ill-smelling steps, and the little face he saw when the portal was opened caused him to dart inside.

"It's me, though I don't look like my old self," said he, catching the child's arm. "Don't make any noise calculated to give me away. I'll not stay long. I'm going off, Meela, may be I will never come back. I want to give you this. It's not much, but you'll remember Silas by it anyhow."

He ran one hand beneath his shirt and drew forth a locket, which he put into the girl's hand, closing the dark little member over it.

"You're going off?" said the child, looking up into his face, still red from the razor.

"I've got to go. Don't ask me why. I know that Poco has left you. Tilman—No, I heard it elsewhere," he caught himself. "You're left alone, aren't you?"

"Not quite," said the child, and then she seemed to think that she was at the edge of a grave secret. "I mean I'm not alone for I have neighbors, you see. Must you really go?"

"I must, curse it! These things come to all, I guess. I'm in the shadow, Meela. Don't tell them where you got the locket. There's a picture in it; but you needn't know whose it is. The gold's good and you can have your own face put in the place of the one now in the locket. Good-by."

The little Italian followed him to the door, and he looked down into the upturned face with a good deal of sympathy.

"You won't care if I kiss you, eh?" and before she could resist, even if she had cared to, he caught her up and pressed his face to hers.

In another second he was off, and Meela heard him going up the steps.

As she turned toward the back part of the

room a door opened and a man stood in the way.

"Did you see him?" she cried. "He has been my friend for two years, dropping in upon Poco and me here. Look what he gave me to keep, for he has gone off never, he says, to come back," and she held out the locket, which the man took.

"Do you know whose face it is there?" she went on. "I haven't looked myself—"

Hiram Hawk, the detective, had looked once at the face in the locket, and the next moment he handed it back to the little Dago.

"Keep house till I return," he said hastily, and vanished.

On the steps the ferret-sport saw no one, and then he went up to the sidewalk.

Down the street flitted a figure in the shadow of the tall houses, and he started in pursuit.

It was a man with broad shoulders and a slight limp to his gait, enough to tell him that he was following Silas Seabold.

He led the Harlem tracker a long chase, and at last plunged into the ferry-house, where he slouched to the darkest corner and sat down.

Hiram, well disguised, watched the man from a distance, and saw him glide toward the boat as it pulled in.

He was just behind Silas's heels as he struck the plank, and in another instant he had said at his ear:

"Go to No. — Hudson street and wait for me."

A shiver ran through Silas Seabold's frame, and the ferret-sport of Harlem thought he would sink to the boards.

"I'll be there," said Silas in return, and sprang upon the boat.

CHAPTER XV.

SILAS SEABOLD'S STRANGE STORY.

If Silas Seabold recognized the voice at his shoulder he made no sign.

Once on the ferry-boat he was restless, and at last settled down in the most secluded corner of the men's cabin and looked out upon the river as the boat pushed across.

He had been seen already. His flight had been discovered almost before it had been fairly begun, and he was to meet some one in a strange house in Jersey City.

With that desperation which sometimes takes possession of the coward, he resolved to carry out his promise made to the unknown, trusting in his strength to outwit his tracker, if such he proved to be, and when the boat reached its pier he was among the first to quit it and start toward Hudson street.

He remembered the number, and, as he slipped along, keeping in the friendly shadows as he had done in New York, he thought of a good many plans, but abandoned all.

It was a small house, dark and apparently unoccupied, to which Silas the flier had been directed, and when he approached the door he hesitated, but the next minute had rung the bell.

The door was opened by a man whose face was barely seen in the faint light that prevailed in the hall, but Silas pushed inside.

"I am to meet some one here in a little while," he said, and was shown to a room alongside the hall, where he was left alone.

"Now that I'm here I'll wait for him," thought he. "I'm better off here, perhaps, than trying to escape from the Sons by slinking down the street like a wolf driven from his post by his hunters. I've a burning curiosity to know who he is and what he looks like. He'll come, for come he will, for he sent me to wait for him, though I think I have come right along."

It seemed hours to Silas left in that lonely room with nothing to amuse him but a few poor prints that tried to adorn the dull walls.

At length he heard a door open and shut and turned his anxious eyes to one which would soon admit the person for whom he had waited.

Silas almost started to his feet when a man entered the room and caught sight of him at once.

He was a well-formed person, apparently forty, with a darkish beard and gloves on his hands.

Silas watched him from the first and at last breathed freer when he saw that he was a man he did not know. At least it was not one of the Sons of Simon.

"You are here, I see," said the stranger, advancing. "I hope you had no trouble finding the house?"

"Not much," answered Silas, starting a little at sound of the voice as if there was something familiar in its tones.

"Very well. We will talk now."

The speaker drew a chair to the table near which Seabold sat and suddenly changed his voice again.

Silas fell back with a cry and his eyes enlarged.

"You?" he cried. "I did not know you when you came in."

It was Hiram Hawk; he saw it now, and the longer he looked into the face before him he made surer that he confronted the ferret-sport of Harlem.

"You were running off, Silas," continued the detective. "You were simply getting away from the shadow."

The listener blanched.

"I can't say that I blame you, seeing how Tilman died. But you should have come to me. I wanted to see you before you went away."

"Hang it all, I couldn't think of hunting you up. I was so anxious to quit the city— anxious to get beyond the infernal hands that kill so swiftly—that I thought only of flight."

Hiram smiled and leaned toward the man beside him.

"I am here to hear all you know about the Secret," he went on.

"What secret?"

"The one the knowledge of which has thrown all of you into the shadow of the Soft Hand."

"Did Nancy give you permission to ask me about it?"

"I haven't seen Nancy since I left her with you in the little house."

"Then I must refuse."

"What, you refuse to place in my hands that which may be a clue to the murder in the Nest? You want Tilman Hoy avenged, yet you refuse to arm me for the avenging. Think a moment, Silas. Is this right?"

The man was doggedly silent.

"You are in flight now, yet you leave the Soft Hands to follow. You are flying from the shadow, yet you leave that Shadow at liberty to take your trail and finish you as it may have finished Tilman. You don't want to arm me. You don't want Tilman Hoy avenged."

"I do above all things."

"Tell me, then. We have plenty of time on our hands and you are safe in this house."

"Whose is it?"

"The house of a friend of mine—a friend as true as steel."

"It's nice to have a friend like that just now," said Silas, with a grin. "It's more than I have."

"You forget me, Silas."

"So I do."

"Without knowing why the Sons of Simon are slaying, as you say they are, how can I take the trail? Nancy Nabbs says they hunt all of you because you three friends heard the last confessions of a dying man. You withhold that confession now and doubly arm the Sons of Simon."

Silas seemed to think rapidly; he saw the gaze of the detective riveted upon him, and he leaned back in his chair and was silent for three minutes.

"After the story, what?" he asked.

"You can go your way."

"You won't seek to detain me?"

"I will not."

The hunted man took another long breath and cleared his throat.

"One question more. Why don't you ask Nancy for the story?"

"Because I prefer to ask you."

The smile came back to Silas Seabold's mouth and lingered there an instant.

"I can't beat you; I see that," said he.

"You will know what we have known, no matter if we took an oath to keep the secret from the world. You are one of the most persistent men I ever saw."

"In the cause of justice, Silas, and in your own behalf."

Hiram Hawk saw that the man had decided to talk. He could tell by his mien that all the barriers had been broken down, and prepared himself to listen to a singular story.

Silas, cornered by the indefatigable detective, squirmed a trifle, but kept his seat.

"Just fourteen years ago," said he, "there died in the house now occupied by Nancy Nabbs a man known to some people as Joel Jaxon. I must tell you a little something about his history."

"He was a man who came to this city in search of a fortune which was his by right. He had been a wanderer over the world, though an American by birth and had accumulated a fortune to lose it in a mysterious manner. In early life he fell in with a man who is now known to us as Doctor Velvet; but more about him anon."

"Joel Jaxon at one time was worth a million, but a crime committed in real early life was the shadow of his existence. He was married when he came to New York, but had not seen his wife and one child since the latter was a babe."

"They separated from him on account of his early crime and the wife hated the husband with all the hatred a scorned woman is capable of exercising."

"Joel Jaxon came to Nancy Nabbs's house in the last stages of a disease which was sapping his life, and Nancy took him in. At that time Tilman Hoy and I were fast friends and Nancy's friends as well. A strange fatality linked us together; in fact, we were banded for the purpose of making money, how I will not say."

"It was not long until we suspected that Joel Jaxon possessed a secret which gave him a great deal of trouble. The man feared his own shadow at last, would not quit the house by daytime, and at night slunk from the light as if it was the worst foe he could have."

"His wealth, invested in a manner which increased it all the time, without any effort of his own, was not in his hands. We at the time did not know where it was, and at times were inclined to believe that the stories he told about it were fables; but we discovered differently. We know differently now."

"Joel Jaxon as he neared the tomb clung to the secret which seemed to be burning out his very life. Nancy watched over him with a fear that he might die suddenly and thus rob us of the secret he guarded so well, and Tilman and I did all we could to draw it from him."

"For five years this went on. Now and then I came across three men who watched the house like thugs, men who came and went until we three felt that we were watched day and night. Tilman saw one of them at the window looking into the room where Joel Jaxon lay, and I ran against another on the street more than once. But they never ventured across the step."

"Nancy never left Joel Jaxon a moment as the end approached. He clung to that secret with the tenacity of death itself, and I predicted that, even with the death-rattle in his throat, he would keep his grip upon it. Meantime the house was watched with more care than ever, and whenever we went abroad we were followed by the human thugs and regarded with fox-like eyes everywhere."

"By accident we discovered that the three men who watched us were called the Sons of Simon. Tilman made the discovery by finding on the pavement beneath one of Nancy's windows a bit of paper containing this evidence. From that time we had a name for the trio, and from that hour we knew in a measure by whom we were watched. You can imagine how the discovery troubled us. We were now sure that the house was under deadly surveillance and Joel Jaxon had enemies whose eyes never left him."

"As the end drew on, the insidious disease weakened the man under Nancy's roof, and he seemed to relax his grip on the secret. Once he seemed on the eve of letting it out, but he caught sight of a pair of eyes at a slit in the curtain and fell back in a dead faint. That ended all proceedings for a time, and we thought he would never come out of the death-like trance."

"The week after this scene he called all of

us into his room, and the moment we opened the door we knew that the end had come. He had dragged himself to a chair at the table and had tried to write, but the pen had fallen from his hand. It was not until he discovered that he was unequal to the task that he summoned us. Tilman went to the window with a revolver and Nancy and I went up to the dying man.

"Then we heard the secret which had been the bane of three lives, and the snuffing out of one. In low tones Joel Jaxon imparted to us, but not until he had bound us with an oath, the secret he had guarded to the brink of the grave. It was about the fortune and his child, the sole heir. He said she was in this city, that he had even seen her, that the mother was dead, that the child, now a young girl well grown, was in the hands of an old man, who did not know much of the secret he (Joel Jaxon) had kept so well.

"Word by word slowly, for he could not talk fast, he let out the secret. He said that he was hunted by the very men who had watched him ever since the early crime, by the triad of sworn enemies who wanted to find the child in order to possess themselves of the millions he owned. He named them all, called them the Sons of Simon, said that Fergus, Con and Doctor Velvet were three cool desperadoes who would not let a dozen lives stand long between them and the prize.

"We listened in wonder at the story he told. Nancy held his pulse while he talked and counted the pulsations which marked the course of the destroyer. We were to find the child; we were to hunt her up and put her in possession of her father's money; but we shrank from the task, for, as he told us, the Sons of Simon would not hesitate to sweep from their path all who possessed the secret he had kept so long, or who were pitted against them.

"Joel Jaxon died that night. At the end of the narrative, which I have abridged, he fell back in a swoon from which our combined efforts could not bring him, and the moment life had fled a footstep left the window where Tilman watched, and we knew that the Sons of Simon had hunted him to the close of life."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SOFT HAND OF DEATH.

SILAS SEABOLD lifted a pitcher from the table, satisfied his raging thirst in a long, deep draught, and continued:

"From the moment of Joel Jaxon's death we realized that we were the custodians of a dread secret. The Sons of Simon, with the pertinacity of sleuth-hounds, followed us wherever we went, and night and day we had them at our heels. It is something to be watched by men of their stamp—to feel that you have at your heels men who are ready to take human life, and that you dare not stray far from the nest without running a danger of finding dark hands of silken softness at your throat.

"It was thus with us from the moment we closed that man's eyes in the sleep of death. At first we laughed at the idea of three men hounding us down as he had been hounded, but by-and-by the thought became more distasteful.

"They resolved to get the secret he had imparted to us, thinking, no doubt, that he had disclosed the whereabouts of the lost heir to his hidden millions, which, as you know, he did not; and for months we were watched.

"Con is the cunning tracker of the triad. He is the ferret of the three, cunning, cat-like in his movements, and agile. Fergus, who has the den on the Bowery, is the tiger of the lot, fierce, hungry and keen; but Doctor Velvet is the head of the Sons, the master spirit of the conspiracy.

"Now about this man while I am with him."

Silas glanced uneasily toward the door, and even inclined his head in that direction, as if he had heard a noise.

"We have no listeners," said Hiram Hawk. "All is safe here, and you can speak out."

"Thank heaven for that!" laughed the man. "Doctor Velvet, called 'the Captain' at times by those who serve him, is, as I

have told you, the heart of the whole thing. He is a man who has been more than one man's evil genius.

"Joel Jaxon knew him when he was quite young, and it seems that he has watched the dead man for years, keeping track of him through crime and trouble, until he saw him the possessor of millions, the exact whereabouts no one seems to know. Doctor Velvet is a man who is merciless and who possesses the refinement of cruelty, a wretch who has cheated the gallows too long already.

"It is said that he has the strength of a giant, to which he has added the agility of an acrobat. With the quickness of the eye he can straighten a horse-shoe with his naked hands, and break a neck like that," and Silas snapped his fingers in mid-air.

"Once in a prison that did not hold him long, and twice hunted by the detectives of two continents, this man finds himself at the head of the Sons of Simon, my foe and Nancy's. He boasts of his American lineage; tells with pride how his ancestors fought at Bunker Hill, and glories in their record. But, for all this, a slither serpent never crept through the shadows of Gotham, nor twisted a neck in the dark."

"You seem to know all about him, Silas."

"Why shouldn't I inform myself after what Joel Jaxon told us with death at his heart? Captain Velvet understands medicine and the workings of poisons that steal the brain and finally kill, leaving no trace. He has under his thumb the two men who serve him, Fergus and Con. They serve him well, and some day when all three sit together with the fortune in their hands, two men may drop dead to the floor and the other will put on his gloves, and walk out with a smile on his sleek face. That is Captain Velvet; that is the head of the Sons of Simon."

Silas seemed to have reached the end of his narrative for he settled back in his chair and looked at the detective-sport.

"You have looked for Joel Jaxon's child, haven't you?" asked Hiram.

"We looked awhile in hopes of finding her and helping to restore her to her father's wealth, but with those thugs at our heels what could we do?"

"You found them wherever you went, eh?"

"Wherever we went!" emphasized Silas Seabold. "There was no night too dark for them and no trail they did not see."

"Where did you look for the child?"

"All over New York."

"Did Joel Jaxon give you any clue?"

"A very poor one—simply a circle made on the bed with his shaky hands."

"It left no mark?"

"No mark," echoed Silas. "Nancy Nabbs says she once heard him mutter in his sleep about a certain street with which he coupled the name Coral, but Nancy may have been mistaken."

Hiram nodded.

"You will let me go now, won't you?" said the man, rising and pushing back his chair.

"You really mean to try to get away from the Sons of Simon?"

"I do. To stay within a thousand miles of New York is to find them at your heels."

The detective of Harlem looked at the man before him and saw that his lips trembled.

"You may be tracked," said he.

"Would that be a surprise? I have been watched for years. I have seen Tilman Hoy dead in his chair with his neck broken and a false scent left for you."

"I remember. You don't believe, then, that Letty Stokes or 'Belle Nemesis,' as she playfully called herself, had a hand in it?"

"I would accuse the angels first," exclaimed Silas. "Letty Stokes thought something of Tilman, rough as he was. She may have said that she would never hear of him loving another woman, but she has said that she never carried the marked dagger to the Nest, nor left on the floor the paper nor owned the glove."

"I've heard her assert this."

"You can believe Letty Stokes. I do. The man who brought the glove to the room in the dark, not knowing that she was concealed there, was simply 'salting' it against her."

"You believe that, Silas?"

"Why shouldn't I?" said the man with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "If he had discovered Letty there he might have killed her."

"How long have you known little Mecla, the Italian?"

"Ever since I became acquainted with her father, now dead."

"You left a locket with her to-night?"

"I did—the one Joel Jaxon left in the room where he died. You have seen it? The face in it may be that of his child; I can't say. I dared not carry it away with me, and I thought Mecla might like it as a keepsake of Silas Seabold, the hunted man."

He crossed the room and stopped at the door, looking at Hiram who regarded him curiously.

"You've changed," said Silas. "I didn't expect to see you at Mecla's."

"No? I am liable to turn up in strange places."

"I hope you won't turn up in the hands of the Sons of Simon. Beware of them. Look out for the cunning of Con, the fierceness of Fergus, and the matchless shrewdness and malignity of Captain Velvet."

Silas opened the door and waved his hand at Hiram who sprung up and started toward him.

"You won't tell any one about this meeting?" he said.

"No one, Hiram Hawk."

"Not even Nancy?"

"No, not even the woman left behind to fall a victim to the soft hands of the Sons of Simon."

"Do you think it will be thus?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Nancy is courageous."

"Nancy plays the fool! I am trying to save my neck; she remains and invites the vengeance of the Sons."

Silas Seabold held out his hand and Hiram held it for a moment when it was withdrawn and its owner vanished.

For half a minute the shadow from Harlem stood in the hall hearing the receding footsteps of the hunted man, then he turned to greet the man who came forward from the lower end of the corridor.

"He's gone at last?" said this person, coming on and stopping in front of him.

"At last, Sam."

"The house has been watched within the last few minutes. A man has passed it three times."

"Out on the sidewalk?"

"Yes, yonder."

"You saw him, of course?"

"I got a glimpse of him, nothing more. He may have followed Silas away—I believe that is what you called the man who just left."

The detective-sport went to the door and opened it slightly.

"That's the same tread," whispered the other, laying his hand upon the ferret's arm.

The door was closed all to a crevice and he watched the pavement.

Presently there fell across the stones the shadow of a man and the next moment a figure came in sight.

He walked like an ordinary pedestrian, passed the house without looking up and went off to vanish down the street.

"That's the fourth time," said the man, looking at Hiram.

Hiram Hawk shut the door and fell back.

"Certain it is he is not on Silas's trail yet. He must have missed him."

"This one may have remained on guard here and the other—if there be two—may be after him."

"We will see."

The Man from Harlem opened a door at the end of the hall and slipped into a back-yard where he found himself among a lot of rubbish.

To scale a fence and thence rush round to the street before the house was the work of a moment, and he stood where he could sweep the pavement with his eagle eye.

He saw no one.

In another minute he was walking in the direction taken by the figure he had just seen, but the strange one had passed entirely out of sight.

Hiram wondered whither Silas Seabold's fright had led him.

Perhaps he had gone to the depot to take the first train out and thitherward he bent his steps.

Still he met no one whom he recognized, and at length he entered the car-shed as a boat was unloading her human freight at the pier.

Hiram watched the crowd of humanity that surged into the depot, and gazed more than once into faces which looked for a moment familiar.

In the darkest corner of the waiting-room crouched a figure which caught the keen detective's eye and he strolled in that direction.

"It is Silas, the coward," said Hiram. "He is hiding here till his train pulls out."

He saw how the hat had been pulled over the beetle-brows in the dark, and noticed how quiet the man filled the corner, while around him surged people from a dozen cities, and foreigners from twenty climes.

For some moments the ferret kept aloof and watched the man in the corner.

Silas seemed to have fallen asleep, so still he sat while the train-carrier lifted his voice and warned the passengers that a train was about to start westward.

"The poor wretch is sound asleep, and yet an hour ago his nerves were in a tension and he was telling me a strange story of life and death."

With this the detective approached Silas Seabold.

He did not start at sound of Hiram's footsteps, but filled the corner statue-like as before.

All at once the flickle electric light seemed to illumine that corner with more than wonted brilliancy, and it fell upon the man's face.

Hiram, of Harlem, started at sight of its ghastliness.

It almost horrified him.

He stepped to Silas's side and laid his hand upon the shoulder.

"Come, is that your train about to pull out?" he said, in low, earnest tones. "Get up if you don't want to miss it."

He shook the cuddled man a little and the hat fell off; and then he saw what he had not seen before, a terrible stare in the sunken eyes.

"Hunted no longer," said the ferret. "He has passed the coward's boundary, and the Sons of Simon have found the fugitive with the secret."

He bent over the dead man and caught hold of the head. The slightest movement was enough for the practiced hand of the Man from Harlem; a little twist told him volumes, and he knew that the neck was broken beneath the dingy collar!

Hiram Hawk looked around anxiously, but no one seemed to have seen him with the dead man.

He walked away and mingled for a moment with the throng that passed to the trains.

Once or twice he looked toward the tenant of the corner, and at last saw a man approach him.

The detective saw this person stop in front of Silas Seabold; but the next moment he fell back and stepped away.

Who was that man?—the silent slayer of the Sons of Simon?

Hiram Hawk watched him till he vanished amid the crowds, and the next moment some one cried out that the man in the corner was a corpse.

In another instant a dozen men surged forward, and with one accord confirmed the discovery.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEAUTY'S FLIGHT

"WELL, I got the story from him anyway," thought Hiram Hawk as he watched the excited crowd that filled the space before the man dead on the seat.

Yes, the lips suddenly stricken with death had told him the story of Joel Jaxon, the man with millions and the Secret, and he had listened to Silas's last confession ere he went out into the night to hide from the hunter, but in reality to find death where he thought he was safe.

The detective did not remain long in the depot from whence the body was taken to be

hauled to the dead-house, there to be identified, or buried after a time among the unknown thousands who find their last rest beneath the sod of Potter's Field.

Should he go across the river and tell Nancy Nalbs?

No; he was dead to a part of the world himself, dead to that woman who had chosen to remain behind and face the Sons of Simon with her secret; he could only go back and return to little Mecla, the Italian.

Time would come, perhaps, when he could tell Nancy something of the last hours of Silas Seabold.

He left the dead man to the tender mercies of strange hands and took the boat back to New York.

He reappeared to the little girl who waited for him in the new home and she asked after Silas, but got no truthful information.

She called him Hiram Hamish, the name Noodles had given him, and he replied to it as if that had been his name from the cradle.

Noodles had been to Mecla's home during his absence and had left a note for him.

Mecla found this note where she had stowed it away and handed it to the detective.

Hiram retired to a corner and read it.

It was a simple report that everything was progressing all right in the double home in Harlem; little Mellie had recovered some strength, but had not returned to her tracings on the wall, and Parker was as watchful as ever.

At that moment Noodles was in another part of the city where he would not have been seen for a good deal of money.

After taking the note to the little Italian's house for the ferret-sport, he had crossed one-half of the city to turn up at the door of a house set in darkness and to be admitted after three peculiar raps.

Belle Natterby, with a face devoid of color, looked at Noodles as he came in, shot the bolt and conducted him across the floor to another room.

"We are going away," said she in whispers.

Noodles started.

"It's retreating in the face of the foe," said he.

"I know that, but he is inflexible. He won't hear to anything else."

"Where is he?"

The young girl pointed to another door and Noodles threw it open.

He found Old Felix on his knees before an old-fashioned safe, stuffing into his bosom a lot of papers and rag-like looking things.

The old Jew did not hear Noodles and was not aware of his proximity till his hand fell lightly upon his shoulder.

He started like a person suddenly bitten by a serpent and turned his frightened face full upon the new-comer.

"You aren't going to drag me away at this time, are you?" asked Noodles.

The old man grinned.

"To stay is to be robbed and perhaps choked to death," he answered.

"To go is to lose the girl."

Old Felix shook his head.

"I know a better nest," he smiled. "I know a place where they won't find us."

"A place where perhaps there is no light and nothing but foul air for her to breathe."

"Light and air—plenty of both."

"Where is it?"

Felix shook his head again and Noodles bit his lip.

"They may be on the alert and your every movement will be watched. You can't run off in the teeth of fate, old man."

"We must!"

Noodles touched the slanting shoulder again and this time his hand shut there.

"You shall not!" he exclaimed.

In another minute the wrinkled face of the old man assumed a leonine expression and his lips met madly underneath the hooked nose.

"No man shall stand between Felix and what he thinks best for himself and her," he almost hissed. "We are almost ready to go. One more package from the strong box—here it is. Now!"

His hands closed about another long dingy envelope and he rose to his feet with the light of resistance still in his eye.

"Heavens! you don't mean that you are going to drag Belle into the streets to-night?" cried Noodles.

"We're going now, going to the nest where they won't find us."

It was useless to argue with the old man, and Noodles turned away, seeking Belle Natterby in the other room.

"He is determined to go," said he. "You are to be taken away yet to-night. Where is Orrin?"

The girl flushed slightly at mention of her lover's name and shook her head.

"To go with Felix is to remain in the shadow of the Triad," continued Noodles.

"I am convinced that you will be watched by the Sons of Simon. He cannot remove you to a place safer than this is at present."

"I believe that."

"He is so well known in this vicinity, his figure so well described, that he cannot escape detection, no matter how well he disguises himself."

Belle looked toward the door beyond which the old man was making the final preparations for flight, but did not speak.

"I have remonstrated with him, but he is as stubborn as an ox," Noodles went on. "I will not talk to him again. He has taken from the safe what papers he intends to carry off, and in all probability has secreted in his bosom those which he feared the robbers carried off from the hiding-place in the wall."

"I saw him thus secrete them. He will not trust them to niches any longer, but will live and die with them in their hiding-place near his heart."

"There is one way to baffle this old man. If you go with him I am convinced that the Sons of Simon will track you to the new nest, and that from the moment of your reaching it you will be deeper in the toils than ever."

"Where is your friend Hiram?"

"On the trail, perhaps, but never mind him. We are to look to the present moment."

Just then a noise was heard in the room beyond and Belle looked at Noodles saying:

"He has closed the safe door. In another moment we will stand face to face with him."

"Come, then. I will show you a nest as safe as the one to which Old Felix would transport you."

"You?" cried the girl drawing back.

"Yes. I think I know a place where they will not be able to trace you out. Remember the Sons of Simon want to find you. We will escape them if possible."

Belle Natterby seemed to hesitate, but the hand of Noodles closed upon her wrist and he nearly dragged her across the room.

In another moment they stood for an instant in a chairless room through which they proceeded to a back yard where they found the cool night air in their faces.

Behind them they heard the noise of the opening and shutting of doors, and then the voice of Felix, the Jew.

"There is no going back now; it is too late," said Noodles in low tones. "It must be forward from now on."

They glided through the yard to the alley and in a short time were putting a good deal of space between them and the old house.

Belle said nothing until they were out upon the street again, and Noodles with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes looked at her in triumph.

"It will trouble Old Felix, but only for a time," said he in response to the girl's fears. "He will know in time that all this is for your good and his as well; but he must not take you to the place he has selected."

Half an hour later Noodles drew up in front of a very modest house and glanced at his companion.

"I have never seen this house before," said Belle.

"Of course not. This is safer than the nest he had chosen. I will vouch for that."

"They will not find me here?"

"Not while Orrin and Noodles keep their wits," was the reply.

The fleeing girl was ushered into the house by a modest-looking woman of fifty who looked strangely at Noodles; but the young man smiled, laid his finger upon his lips and accompanied her to the little parlor near the door.

"I will not ask you where I am," said Belle Natterby. "I am trusting all to you."

Shamus. You would not bring me to a dangerous place."

"Trust Noodles, if he is but a spy and another's slave. You are safe here if anywhere; but time will tell."

He parted with the old Jew's charge, reassuring her that she would find a firm friend in his friend, the woman of the little house, and pulling his hat over his brows, Noodles stepped out into the night and vanished.

"I'll go back and see how Felix takes the forced desertion," he muttered. "I won't let the old fox see me; but I will take a squint at him before morning."

He made his way back through the fleeting shadows of early morning to the place from which he had taken Belle Natterby.

There was not a vestige of light about the premises, and Noodles slipped up to the several windows and looked and listened.

He could not hear anything of Felix, and was about to give up the search from the outside, when the front door opened and a man came forth.

Fortunately, Noodles was in a position where he could not be seen even by the keenest eyes, and he kept it while he held his breath, watching the man all the time.

Suddenly a low whistle was sounded, and from the shadows beyond the door glided another figure, and stopped on the steps in front of the first.

Noodles held his breath.

"It's an empty nest," said the man who had opened the door. "The birds have flown."

A half-muttered oath was the response, and the second man threw out a clinched hand.

"They were here two hours ago!"

"That may be, but the house is at your service. I have ransacked it from roof to vault. If you can find either Old Felix or the golden dove you have better eyes and hands than I have."

"Are there signs of flight?"

"Plenty of them. The safe has been plundered; the old man has stripped it of everything valuable in his eyes, and the girl has taken herself off and left no clue behind."

"But she must be found. They must be traced if it takes a ransacking of the whole city. We can't call on our ferret for help this time, hal ha! He would betray us again if we could call back the dead and their cunning. No, I won't go in and look. I'll trust your eyes. They see everything, even in the dark. Come, let the old trap be. We will find the trail. I have just come from across the river."

"What took you over there?"

"The newspapers may answer that question to-morrow. The blackbird's flight has been arrested. Now for the closing of the game; now for the final play, and the silencing of all who stand between us and millions!"

Noodles saw two figures glide off into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ACT OF NANCY NABBS.

It was the next night after Noodles's adventure.

The city newspapers had given a brief account of the finding of Silas Seabold dead in the Jersey City Depot, and thousands had dismissed the paragraph with the merest glance.

One man is nothing among thousands, and sudden deaths are common on all lines of travel.

One or two newspapers speculated over the matter, but none entered into the mystery of the case, and the shrewdest reporters failed to draw a parallel between this man's death and the murder of the poor wretch in the Nest.

If there were one or two people who connected the two deaths, they did not go to the police with their theories, and the department was none the wiser with suggestions of another crime.

In a little house well known to the reader, from the fact that he has crossed its threshold several times, sat a woman alone.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, yet she was not occupied with any work, but filled a comfortable chair near a table, and looked toward a door which did not open.

Nancy Nabbs was one of those who did not know that the flight of Silas Seabold had ended across the river, and that the corpse of the coward lay in the dead-house over there, cared for by none, and a subject for rude jests.

Nancy was not waiting for Silas for he had told her that he would not come back.

She might have been expecting Hiram Hawk, for she did not know of his exit from public notice after the burning of the house near her own nest, neither was she looking for Noodles who seldom came her way.

The clock struck twelve and Nancy rose to enter the adjoining room.

It was past her bedtime. She had been up long enough, and as she turned toward the little chamber where she slept and had slept for twenty years, she cast a look over her shoulder as if she was sorry she was alone.

It was in that room that Joel Jaxon had died.

She must have recalled the scene as she paused at the door with a strange look in her eyes and a smile at her lips.

It did not require much will power for her to recall the last moments of that strange man's life; how he gave out the secret which had troubled him so long—the secret wanted by the Sons of Simon, and how at last she and Tilman and Silas had listened to it with the spy at the window, as his footsteps were to prove when life had left the worn and wasted body.

Nancy Nabbs took a long survey of the little room.

All at once she went back to the little table and opened the drawer it held.

A sigh escaped her as she put one hand into this drawer and took out a little package.

"It's not very safe here," she murmured. "Of course it's not worth much as precious things go, but it's all I have."

She opened the package and disclosed to her own eyes a few bills which were of goodly denominations, after which she took all with her and sought her bedroom.

The light there was burning low and she did not disturb it.

Better go to bed in the dark than turn on the light so that prying eyes could see where she placed her all.

Suddenly Nancy Nabbs fell back from the window, and then, with a half-suppressed scream, she clutched the table, for the lower sash flew up and she stood face to face with a man.

It was a stoutish figure that confronted Nancy, a form full of bull-like strength, yet suggestive of prowess and agility.

The man wore a mask over the upper half of his face which hid his cheeks and rendered his black eyes all the more intense in their flashings.

His hand let the window down behind him and for a moment he stood a few feet from Nancy, looking at her with the triumph of a cool head.

She glanced at his hands and saw that they were gloved and that one glove was ripped up the back.

He advanced, still eyeing her, and she retreated to the bed where she stopped.

"What do you want at this time o' night in a lone woman's house?" demanded Nancy.

She thought she caught the fringe of a smile at the lips underneath the mask.

"Don't you know that this means prison if they catch you?"

This time he laughed, but the cachinnation was so devilish in intonation, that Nancy Nabbs felt a cold chill moving along her spine.

"I can raise the alarm," she went on, as he had not spoken. "I can summon the police in an instant."

"Yes, but you won't, Nance," was the reply. "You might fill the shanty with the blue-coats, but you will do nothing of the kind—not to-night, at any rate."

"Who are you, then?"

"Names are not necessary just now."

"But you are not an honest man—"

"We won't discuss that point. You might get the best of me if we did, so we'll let that go."

"Come," cried Nancy, feeling her nerve deserting her. "I will not talk with you here."

"Very well. We'll just walk into the little parlor and talk there!"

"I won't talk at all."

"You won't, eh?" and he seemed to lean toward her. "We will see about that."

In the one hand that had been drawn from his coat pocket glistened the whitish barrel of an English "bull-dog," and Nancy saw it in a jiffy.

"Into the parlor!" he went on. "I am here to talk with you a little and the quieter you keep the better for yourself."

He forced her from the bedchamber at the muzzle of the revolver, and she turned upon him the moment she crossed the threshold.

There was danger in the black eyes that seemed to dance behind the mask and Nancy felt that perhaps she was about to close her account with nature.

"Sit down!"

The half-nerved woman sunk into the chair at the table and tried to look calm.

The man did not follow her example, but leaned against the edge of the table and folded his arms.

"You're alone in the world, Nancy?" said he.

"I've been that way these twenty-three years."

"You've had friends, though?"

"A few."

"Besides this, you have had boarders."

She thought of Joel Jaxon, but did not speak.

"It can't be that you've forgotten your long-time guest—the man who died under this roof."

"You mean Joel Jaxon?"

"Yes, the man who went to pieces under the dread disease which takes so many lives. You kept him a long time, Nancy."

"He had no other home."

"Just so, and yet he had enough to have furnished a house better than this."

"Really, I don't know about that."

The lips curled with a smile and the eyes got another sparkle.

"You don't care to discuss this subject, I see that," he said, looking at Nancy. "I am here then to talk about this very man."

The woman started in her chair but made no answer.

"He died in this room, I believe."

"In yon corner."

"You waited long for the end; you watched him with the patience of Job, though now and then you grew a little uneasy. When you were not near him either Silas or Tilman was."

"It was my duty to look after his wants. He was a dying man, you see."

The listener bowed and went on:

"You were waiting for the secret he kept so well. You feared at times that he would die and make no sign—that he would be called away without telling you what was near his heart."

"I don't know how you found this out."

"As to that, we find out a good many things nowadays, Nancy," he laughed. "He died, but he told you three."

Silence met this declaration.

"It's been a pretty troublesome secret, eh, Nancy?" said the strange man.

"All secrets are more or less so."

"That's right. They give people an uncommon sight of bother, and some are pretty hard to keep; but never mind. You needn't keep yours any longer."

No wonder Nancy Nabbs fell back with a gasp, for the man seemed to have spoken her doom.

"I say you needn't be bothered with this white elephant any more after to-night," he suddenly resumed. "You can tell me what Joel Jaxon told you three."

"It's a secret, sir," cried Nancy.

"Of course it is. If it wasn't do you think I'd be standing here talking about it?"

"But—"

"Pshaw! you need have no scruples," he broke in. "It must belong to others as well as to yourself. You may tell me. I am listening with all ears."

Nancy looked up at the mask, but made no reply. Tell him what she had sworn to keep? Reveal the last words of Joel Jaxon, her longtime guest? Tell this night wolf all this and let him profit thereby? She would not!

He seemed to read what was passing

through her mind, for he slightly unfolded his arms and looked straight at her.

"Come, I say. A confession now may keep you out of a good deal of trouble."

"But I promised—"

"Of course you did, Nancy. He bound all three of you with an oath which was quite natural. I don't blame him, nor do I censure you for wanting to keep the secret. But we want it."

"You mean the—"

She dared not utter the name that came upon her tongue. She was afraid to mention the dread band which she had feared so long and which had hounded her whenever she went abroad and had watched the house twixt twilight and dawn.

"That's what I mean," he finished for her.

"We want the secret, Nancy Nabbs."

"I can't break my word to him."

"Pshaw, he's dead," was the retort.

"You don't want to tell me where his millions lie; you don't care to give us a clue to his child. I see that, I say. But, by Jove! woman, you must. This parley must end right here. I don't quit this house without the secret in every detail. You will begin now."

People driven into a corner become desperate at times.

Cowards fight like heroes under some circumstances, and this was true of Nancy Nabbs.

She saw in the man before her one of the Sons of Simon.

Perhaps she saw the same hands that had broken Tilman's neck, the same eyes that had piloted their owner to the room in the Nest, and the same mask that had sneaked upon him.

All at once she sprung up, so sudden that the man at the table could not unlock his arms quick enough for her.

The lamp was the nearest weapon to her hand, and her fingers encircled it with a spasm of madness.

In another moment she had raised it above her head, and with a hoarse cry of "Never!" she hurled it at him.

The burning globe struck him fairly in the face; there was the sound of shattered glass, accompanied by the wild cry of a tortured man, and as he staggered back Nancy Nabbs burst from the room and rushed from the house, leaving behind her a flash of leaping flame.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NIGHT TRIP TO HARLEM.

"SATAN take him!" screamed the flying woman, as she scaled the fence at the end of the lot behind the house.

She did not pause to look back, but glanced over her shoulder and thought she saw a bright light in her house, then she continued her flight nor paused till she had put a full square between her and the place.

As to the man so suddenly attacked he had been brought face to face with a great danger.

The bursting of the lamp threw out a spurt of blazing oil and his garments became ignited.

He dashed hither and thither in his efforts to extinguish it, and at last broke open the door between him and the street and fell across the pavement in his agony.

Here he was seen by several people and the police who came to his assistance and attended to him putting out the fire, but not until he was terribly burned.

The fire within the house was also put out in time to save it, but Nancy did not come back.

The man thus burned did not give his name, stolidly refusing to do so, and, unknown, he was taken to the emergency hospital in the patrol wagon where he still remained a mystery.

Nancy Nabbs crouching in the shadow of a tall building was afraid to venture back.

She remained in seclusion for more than an hour and at last decided to move away.

She would not find Silas Seabold in the little nest he formerly occupied, therefore she need not seek that place, but there was another door open for her.

Nearly an hour after her adventure she

knocked at the door of a modest frame house on a very quiet street and Letty Stokes greeted her.

Tilman Hoy's friend was astonished to see Nancy at her door at that hour, and for some time the lamp-thrower sat nerveless in Letty's chair watched by the woman who had given her shelter.

As she regained her composure she related the story of the night, and Letty listened without breaking in once upon the strange narrative.

"If Silas hadn't run away I would not have troubled you, Letty," said Nancy. "You see he couldn't stand the strain any longer and I am the only keeper of the secret now in New York."

Letty's eyes wandered to a newspaper that lay on her table and she drew it toward her, folding the sheet in a certain manner as she did so.

"Then, you haven't seen the paper?" said she.

Nancy's eyes fell upon the sheet and she shook her head.

"Silas is never coming back."

"I'm glad of that."

"He couldn't return; it's impossible."

"But a man what runs off with the shadow of death before him isn't the one to come back and face it."

"He was face to face with death last night and it conquered."

"What's that?—face to face with death?—Silas?—and it conquered?"

"It must be him from the description," said Letty. "I happened to see it—just happened you understand."

She handed Nancy Nabbs the newspaper and indicated the particular paragraph she wanted her to read.

Nancy took the paper tremblingly and leaned toward the light.

It didn't take her long to master the item about the man found dead in the depot cver in Jersey City, and with a long-drawn breath she looked up at the woman in the other chair.

"It's Silas!" cried she. "He didn't get far."

"I thought it was him the moment I read the account. I made sure of it."

"How, Letty?"

"I crossed over and took a look."

"At the dead?—at Silas?"

"Yes."

"In the dead-house over there?"

"At their Morgue."

Nancy seemed to clench her skinny hands.

"Two taken and one left! I am the only keeper of the secret—the only living being who heard the fatal confession of Joel Jaxon."

"Do you think, Nancy, that it was not an accidental death?"

"It was murder, like Tilman's was. It was the work of the Soft Hands. Don't you see, Letty Stokes? It was a sudden twist of the neck, a grip and a shake."

"But the newspaper doesn't say—"

"I see it don't, but you'll find that it was murder in the depot amid a thousand living people. Where is Hiram Hawk?"

Letty shook her head.

"I suppose he could be found at home."

"I will go at once."

"To Hiram Hawk's house?"

"To the home of the one man who already knows that Tilman was murdered. I am going to offer him all I've got to avenge your friend and mine, and I'm not a beggar, Letty."

Nancy opened her bosom and put one hand in, searching as it seemed for something hidden there.

"If you have taken me for a beggar look at these, Letty Stokes," she cried drawing out a flat packet which she began to open in Letty's presence.

"Heavens! Nancy, where did you get them?"

"Don't call me poor now!" was the cry, accompanied by a laugh. "Don't look up on Nancy Nabbs as one who wouldn't have enough to keep her from Potter's Field if life should quit her body to-night. Where did I get them? Joel Jaxon might tell you, if the dead told stories, which they can't. They're a king's ransom, aren't they? Look at this big one—fit to blazon on the bosom of a duchess, Letty. And here is one which he said was worth three thousand, and this

little one, pear-shaped—they say pear-shaped ones are the most valuable ones—Ha, ha, ain't this enough to set Hiram Hawk on the trail of the Sons of Simon?"

"But you should wait till daylight, especially if you intend to take all those diamonds to his house."

"Of course I'll take them with me," vociferated Nancy Nabbs. "You don't think I'd leave them in human keeping and go without them? I'd as soon think of leaving my soul behind."

Seeing that Nancy Nabbs was determined to carry out her threat yet that night, Letty Stokes did not try any longer to detain her.

"I know the number of his house and how to reach it," resumed Nancy. "You may think I will have the Sons of Simon on my trail, but I guess not. I know of one who will not be found there. I guess he got a coat of fire when I threw the lamp. It hit him fair in the face and then I ran."

Letty cautioned Nancy to exercise care on her nocturnal journey, and let her out of the house.

"Look behind you pretty often," she admonished.

"That I will, Letty. This is a mission of life, death and vengeance, a three-fold one, you see."

"And it belongs in part to me, too, Nancy. They killed Tilman, and this ferret avenges me as well as you when he brings the guilty to the bar of justice and untangles the present skein of crime."

"Which he'll do! I know him; I have looked into Hiram Hawk's eyes and read victory there."

Nancy Nabbs was bidden God-speed and Letty saw her depart with many misgivings.

Indeed she watched her out of sight and at last turned back into her little house to think of the woman and her diamonds.

Nancy made her way toward Harlem, cuddled for a part of the time in the darkest corner of the car, and at another time among the shadows of the pave.

It was a long journey for a lone woman and she seemed to be leaving the great city behind her as she journeyed on and on, crossing Harlem River at last with beating heart.

Nancy Nabbs at Hiram Hawk's door in the last quarter of the night, was a revelation to the man who responded to her raps.

He leaned over the step and looked searchingly into her eager face.

Nancy plunged into the house without an invitation and turned upon the porter under the jet that partly illumined the corridor.

"It's Nabbs!" cried Noodles.

Nancy fell against the wall out of breath, and looked at the gaunt figure of the detective's spy who watched her with a singular expression.

"What brings you away up here, Nabbs?" he demanded. "Don't you know that Hiram isn't home?"

"I'll wait till he comes."

"Then you'll wait a long time."

"But he'll come, won't he?"

"That depends."

"Where is he, then? I must see this man who has promised to sift that which is dark and find grains of light. Another man has been killed; the same hand that killed Tilman has played the same dread game, and Silas—"

Noodles broke in upon her sentences with a cry, and threw out his hand deprecatingly:

"You'll waken Parker and the child," he said. "The little one is restless, and Parker is nursing her in the other room, and if you don't stop you'll—"

That moment the door opened and Parker made her appearance.

"Who is that creature, Noodles?" she exclaimed, covering Nancy with her finger.

"It's Nabbs. Maybe I've told you about her. Nabbs is Nabbs, and she wants Hiram—"

"You can't see him to-night. I don't know where he is, and if Noodles knows he is as mute as an oyster."

"You know, Noodles," accused Nancy turning upon the spy in the teeth of Parker's words.

Noodles made no reply.

"I sha'n't quit this house till I see Hiram Hawk. If I go out they may find me, and then there will be no one to avenge. You don't know what I know. I'm rich. I carry

upon my person a king's ransom; I can buy all the people in this house. Who's the child? I don't want to waken any child, and I'll be still if you let me remain. To go out again is to invite the Soft Hands to my throat!"

Noodles and Parker exchanged looks, and the housekeeper laid her hand upon Nancy's arm.

"You may remain, but you must obey me. The child hovers between life and death. She has made her last tracings on the wall. Hiram Hawk will come home if he lives. You will see him in this house;" and she led Nancy into a darkened room where silence reigned.

CHAPTER XX.

LETTY STOKES TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME.

HIRAM HAWK, under the name of Hamish Holt, dwelt in the house occupied by little Mecla, the Italian.

He had gone back to this place after his startling adventure in the Jersey City depot, where he discovered the second victim of the Sons of Simon.

To Mecla he was really Hamish Holt, the friend of Noodles, who, strange to say, was her friend, and had been for several years.

There was a mystery about Noodles which even the ferret-sport had never fathomed.

Noodles was a strange man, who could play the spy to perfection, and Hiram Hawk owed more than one good clue to him.

Hiram felt that he had seen the second victim of the Sons; that Silas Seabold, at the threshold of flight, had been struck with death by the Soft Hand, and had died in the midst of his fellow beings unseen and unnoticed.

He did not go and tell Nancy about the death of the coward.

If he had sought the little house he might not have found that person at home, for Nancy was liable, so thought Hiram, to abscond like Silas, and with more chances for success.

Noodles was the sole sharer of the secret of the detective's continued existence as Hamish Holt.

It was safe to say that Noodles would keep the secret, and that it was entirely safe in his hands.

The night after the sudden death in the depot, and the same one which witnessed Nancy's flight from the little house, saw Hiram Hawk in a certain part of the city regarding with interest a man who quietly sipped his coffee in a modest restaurant near Broadway.

This man did not seem to take the least notice of the modestly-dressed man who seemed to be discussing a grilled bone, but who in reality was watching him with the eye of a falcon.

Hiram Hawk paid less attention to the bone than he did to the man near by.

After awhile the diner rose and looked around the room.

He saw the detective, but did not regard him with more than a passing glance, and passed from the establishment.

This man was Doctor Velvet; he was the person called the Captain by the little person who lived in the den on the Bowery, and the same man known to Nancy Nabbs as the head of the Sons of Simon.

If the ferret-sport had followed him that night, which he did not more than half a dozen squares, he would have seen him let himself into a house with a pass-key, and turn on the gas in a well-furnished room.

Half a minute later another person entered.

This man was younger than Doctor Velvet; his face was blotchy and red, and his eyes had a restless, cruel and cunning look.

"I thought I might have to wait a while on you," said Doctor Velvet, smiling as the other came in.

"I'm generally on hand, and this time you see me ready for anything that turns up."

"Where did you leave Fergus?"

"In his nest."

"I have work for you. You are to go to Harlem."

"To Harlem?"

"Yes, sir. To be explicit you are to go to No. — Bremer avenue."

"That is the Harlem detective's number."

"It was his number," was the response accompanied by a smile. "You must remember that we speak of him in the past tense now."

The listener bowed.

"But the house is still inhabited by those who lived with him, I suppose?"

"Just so, Con."

"And I am to go to Harlem to-night?"

"Yes."

Con stood about, waiting for further orders, while the man at the table looked at him a moment without speaking.

"You will find out just who are in the house and where the child sleeps."

"The child?"

"The child, I said. You will find out exactly where she sleeps and how she is guarded."

"I will do that."

"There are three people in the house now — Parker, the housekeeper and the child's guardian, Noodles, the spy, and the little one herself. These people have for some time constituted the detective's household."

"Yes."

"We are not caring anything about two of these folks just now; but the third one is important."

"Which is the child?"

Doctor Velvet nodded.

"After you have discovered exactly where she sleeps and how she is watched, who stays with her and what liberties she has, you will report to me."

"Am I to enter the house?"

"You are to bring me the information I want; I don't care how you get it. I must know just where the child is and how she is guarded."

The man with the blotchy face seemed to retreat a step, but he looked keenly at him who issued orders.

"What if I come across Noodles, the spy? What if the little one is so closely watched that I cannot get all these details—"

"Then you need never report to me."

The beetle brows of the listener frowned, but he did not speak.

"Now you can go," said Doctor Velvet. "You will find out all that I have mentioned — see how Parker watches the child and where Noodles sleeps. Don't let anything escape you."

"I never do," answered Con with a grin. "I am off for Harlem; but I won't have the ferret himself against me this time."

"Of course you won't, but be cautious all the same."

Half an hour later Doctor Velvet opened the door of a little apartment, to reach which he had left the pavement of the Bowery. He stood in the dark for a little while, as if listening for the regular breathings of a sleeper, but hearing nothing of the kind, he struck a light and turned on the gas.

He was the only person in the room.

"What's become of Fergus?" he asked himself. "I sent him to get the secret from Nancy Nabbs and he doesn't seem to have come back."

He crossed the room and unlocked a little drawer in the table, putting in his hand and taking out a dirty memorandum-book, the leaves of which he turned, as if in search of something.

"He hasn't left anything here," he went on. "Sometimes when he comes back he leaves a report and goes off again; but this time he's done nothing of the kind."

Doctor Velvet suddenly heard some one come down the corridor just outside the door; then he went forward and stopped at the portal.

The footsteps which were cat-like came up to the door and stopped there.

The man in the room drew back and lowered the light.

The very color of his face changed.

If it was white a moment before, it was crimson now, and he seemed to lean against the jamb while his hands shut and his eyes watched the knob which he expected to see turn.

Some one was out there, but who?

Who had tracked down the head of the Sons of Simon and who now stood close to him with but the plank of a door between them?

The captain's gloved hands moved uneasily, while he listened and his breath appeared to stop.

At last the footsteps receded and he opened the door just enough to look into the dimly-lighted hall.

Toward the head of the staircase moved a female figure. He saw it fairly well and noticed that it was tall and robed in black.

"Who is she? Nabbs herself?" he ejaculated.

He saw the person pause at the top of the stair and he slipped forward.

Doctor Velvet kept close to the wall, but his eyes never left the strange one for a moment.

When he reached the first step he saw between him and the next landing the same black figure leaning against the wall with face upturned to him.

It was too late for him to draw back.

That the eyes keen and cat-like saw him he did not doubt for he thought he saw them snap with rage.

He resolved to go down and see who had stolen to Fergus's door and why.

The Captain took one step forward when a stern voice called upon him to halt and he did so.

"Don't come any further!" said the same voice and something glittered in the woman's hand.

Doctor Velvet looked, but did not speak.

Her body was stiff and touched the wall, while one of her hands held a glittering thing which had caught his eye.

"I have found you instead of the other one. Well, it makes no difference," continued the unknown. "I am out for blood, so if I kill one tiger of the three what need I care?"

The Captain seemed to recoil from the white face that showed in the light and at the same time a thrill shot through his brain.

Out for blood?

Who was this mad creature?

"Stand where you are! I can see you well enough to average the dead."

The next moment the woman seemed to lean forward and the revolver, thrust upward, covered him, while behind the barrel shone the blazing eyes of a woman scorned.

What could he do?

Under ordinary circumstances he might plunge forward and overpower her; but her fingers were at the trigger, and the least movement on his part might precipitate its pressure.

He suddenly recalled that there were shadows on the staircase behind him.

He might throw himself back and thus disconcert her aim.

There seemed no other way out of the terrible dilemma and to think thus was to act.

With the quickness of a panther the Captain recoiled, at the same time hurling an imprecation at the woman below.

It was the dernier resort of a desperate man and the last act of a mad brain.

The following instant the little space was filled with the report of a revolver which was firmly gripped by the gloved hand of the desperate woman, and Doctor Velvet fell back and lay upon two steps with his hands holding to the edge of one still higher up.

All this seemed the work of a second, and after a look at the body lying there with the faint light of the unseen jet falling over it, the murderess walked away.

She did not pocket the smoking pistol till she reached the sidewalk, and even then she did not put it away without a glance at the place she had left.

"That's one of the Triad!" said she, muttering. "It's one of them, though not the one who inhabits the den up there. Neither can it have been the one at whom Nancy threw the lamp. Never mind; it was one of them, and it may have been the chief."

By and by the man on the stair-steps moved. He was not shot so badly as it seemed, for he rose and re-entered the room he had lately left.

There he found water and bathed a streak of red along his temple, muttering vengeance all the time, and at last went over to the table where he sat down to collect his thoughts.

As for the woman who had attempted his life, she was far from the spot, and not long afterward she unlocked a door and entering a room cast her body into a chair at a table

and falling forward buried her face in her arms.

It was Letty Stokes, the woman who loved Tilman Hoy, the first victim of the Sons of Simon, and she thought she had taken human life in return for the murder in the Nest.

She had scotched the serpent, not killed him.

CHAPTER XXI.

'VILAS VELVET, M. D.'

THERE was now upon the trail of the Sons of Simon a man who, whatever his purpose, had sworn to rest not until he had solved the murder mystery of the Nest.

Little did Mecla, the pretty Italian child who watched the man brought to her desolate home by Noodles, suspect that he was a detective. Childlike, she did not try to pry into his secrets, but received his kind words with smiles and did all she could to please.

Perhaps she wondered where he went when he slipped from her house at dark and remained away till the wee sma' hours, to come in easily for fear of disturbing her, and perhaps she wondered, too, what kept him out so late.

Hiram Hawk heard at intervals from the house on Bremer avenue: he heard that Mellicie, the trance-child, was coming on fairly well, and that Parker was taking her usual good care of her.

Noodles came down to Mecla's place with bits of news for "Hamish Holt," and the Italian saw them repair to a secluded corner and converse in whispers.

While Con was on his way to the house in Harlem, sent thither by Doctor Velvet, Hiram Hawk was nearing the place of the first mystery recorded in this narrative.

He had not visited the scene of Tilman Hoy's death since the finding of the glove in the dust-heap by Letty Stokes, but now he was approaching the place in the dark hours of what was destined to be another eventful night.

He knew that the room had not been occupied since the strange death made partially clear to him by the last story told by Silas Seabold in the little house in Jersey City.

He climbed to the corridor leading to the fatal room, and went to the door.

As no reward had been offered for the murderer or murderers of Tilman Hoy, the city detectives had not exerted themselves, and those who had given it a second thought had withdrawn from the trail.

Hiram Hawk took from his pocket a bit of wire, with which, after a little manipulation, he opened the door and passed into the chamber.

It was still enough now, and its quietude reminded him of his visit to it with Silas, while the victim of the Triad was sitting dead in his chair.

He struck a light and turned it low, but enough remained to show him the room and its appointments.

The disturbed dust-heap was still in the corner, and he saw the marks of Letty's hand as she hunted for the glove which had been deposited by one unseen.

The Harlem trailer bent over the heap and looked through it himself.

But he found nothing to reward him, and after awhile he rose and stood erect.

An unusual sound roused him, and as he looked toward the door which he had locked, it opened and a man faced him.

There was a janitor-like look about this personage, and he stopped short when he found himself face to face with the Man from Harlem.

Hiram stepped forward, and the old man, with mouth agape, fell back to the door.

"Didn't know you were here," he stammered. "I've been saying that this room's haunted, ever since its tenant was found dead here, and—"

"Haunted, you say?" interrupted Hiram.

"That's what. I've heard strange noises in it every night, and once I saw a female figure slip out and flit down stairs."

"Do I look like a ghost?" asked the ferret sport.

"Not much now—not so much as you did when I first opened the door."

"You're the janitor, aren't you?"

"I am—Joshua Golt."

"How long have you held that place in this building?"

"Seven years come this month."

"You are on duty day and night?"

"Not all night. I make my rounds, the last ones, sir, at ten, and then I slip up to number thirty-one."

"Where you live, I suppose."

"I live there. You're one of them, aren't you?"

"A detective, you mean?"

"Yes, sir, one of the men what come here at odd times to look at this room and to pick up 'clues,' as some of them say."

"I am anything you care to make me in your mind," smiled Hiram Hawk, not wishing to reveal his true identity.

Golt looked him over and seemed to conclude that he was holding converse with a human mystery.

"Sit down, Mr. Golt," continued Hiram.

The old man obeyed, settling down on the edge of the bed at one side of the chamber.

"You knew Mr. Hoy, didn't you?"

"As I know all my tenants."

"That is, not intimately."

"Bless you, no. Did any one know him thus?"

"I can't say. I'm sure I did not."

"I saw him only when I dropped in to collect the rent. He was ready with it every time and never higgled."

"You like that kind of tenants, of course."

Golt bowed.

"When did you see Tilman Hoy last?"

"The night he died."

"At what hour?"

"It was a quarter of ten—I won't forget it, for I happened to glance at my watch just before I opened the door. It was quarter-day and he hadn't been in, so I thought I would drop in before I went to bed."

"He was well enough then, was he?"

"Well enough, but not in good spirits. He seemed to have a presentiment or something of the kind, for he asked me if I hadn't heard footsteps in the house after midnight, as of persons coming up the steps and slipping down the hall out there."

"And you told him—"

"I laughed at what he said, which I thought best under the circumstances, for I didn't like to tell him what I had heard and even seen."

"Oh," said Hiram, deeply interested, "you deceived Hoy, then?"

"Yes. I didn't think I was doing wrong. You know he was nervous, as I could see with half an eye, and to have told the truth would have been to frighten him still more."

"What did you see and hear, Mr. Golt?"

The janitor moved uneasily on the edge of the bed and looked at the detective for some seconds before he resumed.

"This is on the dead, eh?" he said.

"Quite so."

"It was just ten the night before and I was coming out of number twenty-six which is on this floor, but near the end of the hall, when I looked down the corridor toward this chamber. I see'd at the door a figure which at first I thought was Hoy himself, but the more I looked the surer I became that it was another person. He stood right at the door surrounded by the light, for the jet near the door had been turned low, and I leaned forward and looked at the man at the door."

The janitor stopped and took breath.

"I am not afraid of such things, men at strange doors, for I see a good deal of it as janitor, but this man sent a cold chill along my backbone."

"He seemed to be leaning against Hoy's door and had his face close to it. I could see that his hands were nearly black, as if he wore gloves; but his face I couldn't see for some time. I remained standing in twenty-six until the man turned and then for the first time I got a glimpse of his face."

"It was a handsome face, and it seemed to belong to a foreigner, for it seemed to have an olive tint, or maybe the dim light rendered it so. Pretty soon the man straightened and shook his head, then I saw him slip toward the staircase and down he went. He had probably discovered that Tilman Hoy was not in just then, as I found out afterward that he was not."

"I did not see that man again till after the death of my tenant."

"Oh, you saw him since, did you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Once coming out of this very room and once on the street."

"When did he come out of the room?"

"The second night after."

"Go on, Mr. Golt."

"That time I got a better look at him, but the time I met him on the street I saw him to my satisfaction."

"You could not have been mistaken?"

"I wish I could say yes to that," smiled the old man. "I don't want to be mixed up in this matter at all, and I don't want to give any evidence against one who may not have had anything to do with that sudden death. Yes, it was the night after the first one that followed Hoy's death. I had been badgered a good deal by detectives and the police and I felt out of humor. They would hunt me up and ask all sorts of questions till I got out of sorts and I guess I put some of them on some queer trails."

"That night I was in my own room when I heard some one go by. I have good ears if I am on the shady side of sixty, and the Golt's are human weasels when it comes to sharp ears. Well, as I was saying, I heard some one go by my door and out I went. It was an hour when few people pass my door, and I wanted to know who the night-owl was. There he was again, the same man I had seen at Hoy's door the night before he died. He went to the room—to this one, I mean—took a key from his pocket and slipped inside. I didn't go very close, but I heard him moving about in this room. He was in here twenty minutes and I was back in the doorway of twenty-six when he came out. This time I got another look at his face, but while the eyes were the same I had already seen—black and shiny—the face had changed."

"How changed, Mr. Golt?"

"It had no beard this time; before it had one. You see I am an observing old chap; I have to be to take care of so many tenants, and I knew that this was the same man. I saw him go away, but he dropped something at the head of the stair."

"And you found it, did you?"

"Of course," grinned the old man. "I had a curiosity to know what it was, and so I glided forward and picked it up."

"You kept it?"

"Naturally one would, you know."

"Of course."

Hiram Hawk waited for the old janitor to produce the find; but, as he did not, he said:

"It wasn't one of his gloves, Mr. Golt?"

"Land sakes, no! It wasn't that, for he kept them on his hands all the time. It was this."

One of the janitor's hands emerged from his pocket, and he held up before the detective a handkerchief, small and delicate enough for a lady's use.

"It's a little one for a man to carry," he smiled, "but it surely fell from his person that night at the head of the steps. I was disappointed when I picked it up, for, really, I expected something better than it; but one don't always find a bonanza, you see."

Hiram Hawk took the handkerchief, and while he bent forward to inspect it the old janitor called his attention to a name in one corner.

"It's written in indelible ink," said Golt.

"You can see it better by holding it up to the light. There! I make it out 'Vilas Velvet, M.D.'—a queer name for a doctor, if he is one, but just the one for a night-prowler as he was."

Joshua Golt had correctly read the name traced in one corner of the handkerchief, and as he looked at Hiram Hawk he laughed:

"I might have handed it back to him when I saw him on the street the next day; but I didn't; no, I didn't; ha, ha."

"I am very glad you didn't, Mr. Golt," was all the ferret-sport said.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE VOICE FROM THE SHADES OF DEATH.

THE old janitor looked at the detective and tried to divine just what his words implied.

"You say you afterward encountered this same man on the street?" resumed Hiram.

"I ran up against him, sudden, you might say, but I knew it was the same man."

"Make no mistake, Mr. Golt."

"I am making none," replied the old man, positively. "As I have told you, these old eyes of mine have not lost their powers, and the moment I saw him I knew that I stood face to face with the man who entered this room."

"Did he see you?"

"I can't say as to that, but I don't think he recognized me, at any rate."

Hiram Hawk glanced at the handkerchief again and noted the name in the corner.

"You don't want me to tell what I have told you in a court of justice, I hope," said the janitor.

"Not now, at any rate," was the answer.

"You need not fear, Mr. Golt. You will be protected when you are called to reiterate your story."

Joshua Golt rose and threw a look around the room.

"There's one thing that puzzles me," he went on.

"What is that?"

"It is, that feeling as he did, that he was in a shadow of some kind and in danger of being murdered, he did not quit this house and hide somewhere."

"Oh, he feared assassination, did he?"

"Feared it all the time. Just why, he didn't say, but on one occasion he said to me that a secret was a troublesome thing for an honorable man to keep, especially when he was hunted by those who wanted it, or who wanted to silence him."

"Did you see Tilman Hoy soon after he died?"

"I was one of the first to see him."

"And what struck you as being peculiar then?—anything?"

"Yes, sir, the absence of weapons."

"You didn't think of murder, did you?"

"How could I think of anything else after what he had said to me?"

"But you saw no signs of it?"

"Nothing, only the strange position of the man in the chair. I found him sitting there leaning back against the wall, and the moment I see'd him I thought of the man I had seen at his door."

"You mean you associated that man with your tenant's death?"

"Just so, sir."

Ten minutes later Joshua Golt, janitor, found himself back in his little cubby-hole of a chamber thinking of his conversation with the man he had met in the dead man's room.

The old man was alone, and he had tried to think where he had seen those eyes before.

But he could not, and Hiram Hawk, the Harlem ferret, escaped without his identity being suspected.

The detective himself left the building and went away.

The night was not far advanced and he made his way to the quiet street where he had seen Nancy Nabbs.

The little house showed no signs outwardly of the lamp-throwing incident and there was no answer to his knock.

He was yet to learn that the woman had taken refuge in his own house in Harlem and that she was waiting there for his return.

Hiram made his way through the house, strangely not finding any of the doors locked, and at last stood face to face with proofs of an accident of some kind.

There was the odor of a fire on the premises and the smell of oil pervaded the room.

"Nancy's gone," said a voice behind him, and he turned to see a boy poking his head into the place.

"Gone, has she?"

"Yes, she ran away about the time of the fire and the man who tumbled from the house, nearly burned to death, they've taken to the 'Mergency.'"

This was news to Hiram, news which he might have learned if he had made a trip to Harlem, or had seen Noodles within the last few hours.

"What about it?" he said to the boy, calling him into the room.

"Nance must have throwed the lamp at him. He was all afire when he came out o' the house, like he had been fired from a

cannon, but they rolled him in the gutter till they put the fire out and then the cop rung up the Patrol an' off he went."

Hiram Hawk stood a few moments longer in the room and then dismissed the boy, after which he went away himself.

Outside he learned exactly where the unknown man had been taken, and a few minutes later he entered the reception room of the Emergency Hospital.

Yes, the man was there yet, but life was fast ebbing away.

The authorities would be glad to have information that would throw some light upon the man's identity, and Hiram made his way to the cot where the unconscious patient lay.

The face which had escaped much of the fire, though it was cut by the lamp, was one which he recognized with a slight start.

He had seen it in the little den on the Bowery. It was the face of the man with whom he had bargained to find the lost girl—supposed with good reason to be Belle Natterby.

The detective bent over the cot, and listened for a moment to the deep breathings of the man thereon.

All at once the eyes unclosed, and with a wild stare the man looked around him.

He saw the nurse, and then the face of the disguised ferret-sport.

Hiram noticed the set stare with which the man regarded him, and drew back for fear of recognition.

"I know you. I've seen your eyes before. You're the man we thought—"

The injured man ceased, and put up a bandaged hand.

"I am not the person you think me," said the detective. "I have called to see you, hoping that I might tell the people here who you were."

"Don't do that. Don't tell them even if you know. They tell me that it won't be long. You know how I bargained with you to find her. You remember how you took the oath on the Book, and how, when you opened it, you found within the lid the red hand."

"He's been out of his head before," whispered the nurse at the detective's elbow.

Hiram said nothing, but continued to look down at Fergus of the Sons of Simon.

He was thinking rapidly.

Would this man betray his master?

Would he reveal that which was dark—that which he could reveal if he would—or would he take the leap into the dark with his soul burdened with the guilt of a man's death—with the secret of the murder in the Nest?

Hiram Hawk turned to the nurse who stood by him and said:

"Would you leave me alone with this man a moment?"

"I can."

The ferret sport nodded his thanks, and the nurse slipped away.

"Now," said Hiram, bending over the pillow and putting his face close to the dying man's, "we are the only two here. You can talk."

For a moment the dark eyes seemed to light up with satisfaction, and the Harlem Vidocq thought the clue in sight, when Fergus suddenly grated his teeth.

"Tell you? Tell the man who is the hound on the trail—who is trying to hang all of us? I guess not!"

The sentence seemed to be lost in a fiendish laugh, and the head fell back upon the pillow, and the eyes got their old gleam of resistance.

"But, you know, Fergus—"

"How's that? Fergus? Fergus who, I should like to know?"

There was stern defiance in the man's every word.

"I've got nearly all the threads in my hands," continued Hiram, not baffled by the man's tone.

"That's only to make me talk."

"If you could live—"

"If I do I'll get even with Nancy Nabbs who threw the burning lamp into my face! Gods! what a fiend she is. Why, I tried to escape that blazing thing, but as well try to get out of the road of a bullet. It came swifter than one, and struck me fair in the eyes and I saw a hell of fire that seemed to shoot to the ceiling. It was awful. Yes, if

I had a chance to get out o' here, which I have not, for I inhaled her infernal fire, I'd live only to pay her back. My life is near its ending, but you can't get anything from me."

"You might as well give me the last clue. The law will never be able to reach you."

"But there are those whom it can reach—and those are not to be thrown into its iron grip by me."

"You mean the Captain—in other words, Vilas Velvet."

There was a sudden start on the Son's part and his hand moved nervously on the coverlet.

"I don't know such a man," he said through set teeth.

"The slave always knows his master, and you know the Captain who went to the Nest the night Tilman Hoy died!"

"It is false!"

"You serve the man who crossed over to Jersey City and played another cold hand there."

"It is false!"

"This man you have served, Fergus, with a devotion second to none under the sun."

"I don't know the man, I say."

"You wanted to get at Nancy Nabbs's secret, and that is why you went to her house and roused her into throwing the lamp into your face."

The lips met, but the man on the cot made no reply.

"I am fast closing in on the guilty. I will see that the cords of justice bind master and man. I will see that the Sons of Simon pass out of existence as a band and that the hand of justice throttles those who have played this game for Joel Jaxon's wealth, and who have killed in order to keep secret still the secret he imparted to three persons just before he died."

"Joel Jaxon, eh?" exclaimed Fergus. "You have heard of him, have you?"

"I know what he told the three in Nancy Nabbs's house."

A long look came from Fergus's eyes and he seemed to wonder if the detective was not chaffing him on his death-bed.

"You might as well tell the truth, Fergus," resumed Hiram. "I will know it by and by, and Con and—"

"It wasn't Con's work, I say."

"But the man shall suffer with the master," was the answer. "I will see to this."

"You are trying to beat me now," smiled the dying man.

"Very well," said Hiram, drawing back and glancing at the nurse quietly watching them out of hearing.

Fergus's gaze followed him and for a moment relented.

Presently he raised a hand and feebly beckoned the detective to his side.

Hiram bent down again and heard a strange gurgle in the man's throat.

"You are on the wrong trail," said Fergus. "I am a dying man and I know it. I will soon stand where innocent and guilty are sure to stand—before the Judgment Bar of God. You may have in your hands clues that look black against him; but you have the wrong ones. You know that a dagger was found in the room; you know that a piece of paper was found with it. Upon the dagger hilt were two letters: the paper told that the man was killed by a woman he had scorned. You must find that woman. I stand by the master. I say that the Captain is not the guilty one."

The voice ceased and Fergus fell back with a death pallor upon his cheeks.

And yet Hiram Hawk, after hearing all this, believed that he was on the right trail.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PALACE OR A PRISON.

MEANTIME Con of the Sons of Simon had made his way to Harlem for the purpose of carrying out the mission upon which he had been detailed by Captain Velvet.

There was a good deal of natural shrewdness about the man who had been selected for the work planned by the head of the Sons, and he did not doubt that it would be well done.

Con reached Bremer avenue and, knowing where to go, made his way to the near vicinity of Hiram Hawk's house which he

found wrapped in darkness though the hour was not very late.

He was to discover where Mellie the trance-child was lodged, by whom guarded and where the redoubtable Noodles kept himself.

Captain Velvet seemed to fear the spy of the ferret-sport; he appeared to feel that this man was almost as dangerous as his master, and that it was necessary for him to take care of him.

Con slipped through the shades that surrounded the house and at last found himself looking up at the number to assure himself that there was no mistake.

It would not do to commit a blunder while serving Captain Velvet, and it was his duty to carry out the commission to the letter.

As he drew off he saw the front door open and the next moment the figure of Noodles appeared on the step.

"Is the bird going to leave the nest for awhile?" thought Con. "This is better luck than I expected, so I'll just watch him off a little ways before resuming operations."

Noodles seemed to have an errand in another part of the city that night, and the spy of the Sons of Simon followed him some distance, or until he thought he had gone far enough to let him go back to the detective's abode.

Ten minutes later with the boldness of a burglar Con stood under the ferret's roof and rather congratulated himself on his exploit.

If Noodles had left the house there was no one on guard but Parker, the house-keeper, and he did not particularly fear her.

The interior of the house was quiet and dimly-lighted, and he now discovered that the closely-drawn curtains had shut off the light from the street.

Perhaps Doctor Velvet had not intended that his agent should enter the ferret's house, but Con had concluded that the information wanted could not be obtained any other way, and a little risk would not hurt any one.

He glided to the end of the hall where he had seen a streak of light which came from the room beyond and there he stopped and listened.

He distinctly heard a woman talking to a child in soothing tones and a smile overspread his face.

It was Parker talking to the child, Mellie.

He had located the little one and he might have withdrawn without any one in the house being the wiser for his visit, but something seemed to hold him back.

He had never seen the wonderful child of whom Captain Velvet had spoken on several occasions.

"With the detective's little charge we can locate the wealth and the other prize," he had said. "I can control her as well as Hiram Hawk does, and with her I say we will succeed and find in our hand the stakes for which we play."

Con looked up at the transom and found that the covering was attached on his side of it, and a moment later he had nimbly drawn himself along the door and had torn a slit in the paper.

He glued his eager eye to the opening and looked down into the room beyond.

The light was dim, but not too dim for him.

He saw Parker seated at the edge of the child's cot with the transparent hands in hers and her own cheek close to the little one's.

Parker was talking softly to the trance-child, telling her as Con heard with a grin that Hiram would come home soon when she could greet him again.

"He will come back when the earth gives up its dead," chuckled the man at the door. "He will come back when the trump of the last day is blown, for not until then will charred bones be reunited and the dead arise."

It took Parker some time to soothe the child, and when she had done so she lowered her to the pillows and watched her till sleep stole over her gently, as it ever comes to innocent children.

Not until then did Con deem it fit to drop to the floor again, and then he looked half-savagely at the door as if he wanted to open it, and then and there rob Parker of her charge.

He dodged back into the dark portion of the corridor, when he heard a footstep approach the door, and when it opened, letting Parker herself into the place, he hugged the corner and watched her like a hawk.

He noticed that the woman did not lock the door behind her, but moved down the hall to enter a room on the right, the door of which she left ajar.

Con remained in his corner a full minute and eyed the half open door, expecting Parker to come back, but she did not.

The sleeping child in the other room was a great temptation to Captain Velvet's man.

The more he thought of her the more his fingers itched to slip in and carry her off.

It could be done. He could pick her up softly, bring her into the hall and get away in three minutes, and Parker gave promise of being absent at least an hour.

Captain Velvet would not have sent him to this house if he did not intend to rob it of its marvelous little inmate.

He would not have wanted to know how Mellie was watched if he was not planning to supplement Con's present escapade with one more startling still.

With the trance-child they could ferret out the hiding place of Joel Jaxon's treasure, and discover where Belle Natterby, his heir, was concealed, for Captain Velvet had great confidence in the wonderful gift Mellie possessed.

For these thoughts to find a lodgment in Con's brain, was for him to open the door of the little one's room.

He was not disturbed.

One glance seemed to settle everything, and in another moment he had crossed the threshold and stood almost within arm's length of the little sleeper.

There came to the eyes of this sneaking villain the light of triumph mingled with desperation as he glided across the room, forgetful for the moment of all else save the sleeping innocent within his grasp.

She was very fair, but so fragile; her white hands lay upon her little bosom, and her pink lips, knitted in slumber, were too pretty to disturb.

Con bent over the little cot and looked for a moment searchingly at the child.

It would be but the work of a moment to lift her from the bed and quit the room.

He could slip through the shadows to the nearest cabs which stood on a corner not far from the house, and the cabbies, if well fed, would keep the secret with the faithfulness of a sphinx.

Con suddenly put down his hands and placed them gently underneath the little one.

He lifted her as softly from the cot and turned toward the door.

No Parker yet.

At the door he paused and looked down the hall.

The coast was clear and he could make his way to the door by which he had entered the house and thence glide to the back street.

It was a ticklish moment for the child-stealer.

"Here goes! this means millions or Sing Sing," said Con to himself as he sprung into the hall with the sleeping burden in his arms. "It's a fortune or a cell and I prefer the former, la, ha."

Down the hall and out the door he went, stepping softly as he proceeded, with his senses on the alert as he realized the nature of his crime.

He was out at last.

Down the street he caught sight of the lamp flaring in the wind and for a moment saw a figure, but for a moment only.

He thought as he left the step that he heard a noise behind him in the house, but it died so quickly that he concluded he was mistaken.

He had succeeded and all he had to do now was to seek the cab and go back to his master.

Con reached the sidewalk where he looked for the cabs but not one was in sight.

Mellie had not waked and he pressed her a little closer to his crime-stained heart, for the wind was striking her face and he feared it might rouse her.

Con stood perplexed where he had confidently expected to find a hack.

It would not do to go back to Captain Velvet the way he had come to Harlem—by the Elevated.

What would the other passengers think of a man like him carrying a child downtown at that hour of the night? No, it would never do.

He cursed his ill luck and heaped anathemas upon the heads of the all-night hack-drivers, but it did no good; the Jehus did not come to his relief.

"There's another hope," said Con at last. "I can go to the next stand, but it's a long walk. I can't think of going back the way I came up. With this thing in my arms I dare not harbor the thought for a moment."

He started off toward the next corner where he thought he would stand a chance of getting a hack, and Mellie cuddled closer to his heart.

It was a rapid walk of five minutes.

He passed a number of people, but none seemed to take more than passing notice of him.

"Ha, there they are," he exclaimed, seeing before him in the night several cabs ranged along the curb. "I'm in better luck this time. Now for the Captain with the key to three millions!"

He ran up to one of the half-drowsy hack-men and spoke.

"Certainly. Get in. I'll take you anywhere."

"And keep a secret?"

"That's what I'll do for, say, a double fee."

"I'll double it half a dozen times."

"Get in. Does that woman want you?"

Con turned like one stung in the heel by a scorpion.

Toward the hack over the stones of the sidewalk flitted a figure that looked wonderfully to him like Parker's.

"Gods! not a moment is to be lost now," he ejaculated as he leaped into the hack, and as he slammed the door he gave the right directions to the man who bounded upon the box.

The cab started as the figure seen under the gaslight reached the spot where it stood.

"Stop! for heaven's sake," cried a voice and Con pressed his blotchy face against the glass of the door and looked out.

He grinned devilishly as he was carried off, for the woman was trying to open the door itself, and the next moment he saw her fall back with a wild cry swelling from her throat.

"Just in time," chuckled the kidnapper. "It was Parker sure enough, and I got away just in time."

Away went the hack, but the man in it did not see the figure that sprang over Parker's prostrate form and rushed up to one of the other drivers whose arm was seized as with a grip of iron.

"Follow that hack!" she cried, for the speaker was a woman. "You won't, eh? You think I have no money. I carry a king's ransom near my heart."

"But me and Jack have an understanding—"

"Oh, you villain!" grated the woman, turning away. "You have no heart. That man has stolen a child and—and—"

"Jump into my hack then, madam," interrupted the third driver, as he opened a door. "I'll follow him to the infernal regions but what I'll keep track of him."

The following moment Nancy Nabbs was going down the street at break-neck speed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRANCE-CHILD'S TRAIL.

HIRAM HAWK whom we saw last at the Emergency Hospital bending over the couch of the burnt patient, Fergus of the Sons, stood in that position some time after the dying man's last declaration.

Fergus had denied that Captain Velvet was guilty of the crime of the Nest; he had tried to throw suspicion upon the person whose nickname had been found on the bit of paper discovered in the room by the ferret of Harlem; but Hiram had rejected this in his own mind.

"The slave is simply serving his master to the last," he said. "This man is lying while in the very shadow of death. He

keeps the oath he must have taken when he became one of the Sons of Simon, and he stands by both Con and Captain Velvet."

In another moment the hands of Fergus came up again, but they dropped before they could touch the man at the couch.

"You heard me, didn't you?" he asked.

"You have just said that I am on the wrong trail, but you must give me better proof of that than what you have already said."

The white lips met and the crippled fingers essayed to shut tightly, but the effort was a vain one.

"You must look for the party who owned the dagger, and who left behind the paper signed Belle Nemesis."

"There is no 'Belle Nemesis.' You must know that."

"It is one of her names. She will not deny that. She came often to see him."

"But never to kill."

A grim smile passed over the face on the pillow, and Hiram Hawk watched it fade away.

Fergus seemed to think that he had failed.

"You must go back and hunt," said he.

"You must go and look for the hand that slew."

Hiram looked at the nurse who had come up and who was bending over the man on the couch.

"In a moment," said this person. "You are through with him, I suppose?"

The ferret-sport nodded and turned again to Fergus.

There was a short convulsive tremor, a rattling gurgle in the throat, and the head falling back, deeper into the pillow as it were, told that the victim of Nancy Nabbs's defense had joined the great majority.

Hiram turned away and sought the night air again.

Fergus was dead and he had not revealed his identity.

As he walked from the hospital and saw around him the lights of Gotham, his mind went back over the scenes of the last hour.

He knew or thought at least that men can pass the dread boundary line of life with a lie on their lips, yet he sometimes wondered, not for long, however, if he had struck the wrong trail.

The Harlem detective did not remain long in the vicinity of the hospital.

Soon after leaving it he found himself in another quarter of the city, and Mecla, the little Italian, opened the door for him.

"He was just here," said the child.

"Who?"

"Your friend; you know."

"Noodles?"

"Noodles. He gave me this," and she handed Hiram a folded note, which he read with eagerness.

It was a note from Noodles, asking him to come home in his disguise, provided he found the coast clear, and the spy added that it was for Mellie's benefit.

Hiram resolved to go, and half a minute later he was on the way to Harlem.

He doubted not that he would find Noodles waiting for him there; but the moment he opened the door he heard a wild cry, and the figure of Parker rushed into the hall.

She stopped short when she saw before her an apparent stranger, and would have fled with another shriek, but Hiram spoke, and she stood like a statue gazing at him.

"You come back too late," said Parker, trying to calm herself. "The child is gone!"

"Dead?" exclaimed Hiram, with a start.

"Kidnapped."

The face of the ferret grew severe.

"It was your duty to watch her, Parker."

"I know that. I was with her up to within a few moments of her disappearance, and Nancy and I—"

"Nancy Nabbs?"

"Yes; she came here looking for you. She had thrown a lamp into a man's face, and, fearing that she will be hunted down now—she says she is the last of the three secret-keepers, you know—she sought asylum here."

"Tell me all. Don't keep anything back. Where is Nancy?"

"Heaven knows. We followed the child-stealer to the cab station, but I was thrown to the sidewalk as the horses started, and I haven't seen Nancy since."

Then Parker, in calmer tones, told what she knew about the startling theft, and the detective listened with breathless interest.

"You say you saw the man's face at the window of the hack?" he queried.

"For a moment. It was just as I fell back, but I would know it among a million."

"What was it like, Parker?"

"You see that, being pressed against the glass, it looked flatter than it really was. It was a large face, red, as I thought, and it had blotches here and there."

"On the cheeks?"

"Everywhere on the skin," was the woman's reply. "I saw it distinctly, but being pressed against the glass it looked so broad and comical like that I will never forget it."

Hiram saw that the abduction was no fault of the woman's and he assured her that he did not blame her, whereupon Parker seized his hand and thanked him.

She then told him that Mellie seemed to be losing strength, that she wanted to see him so badly, and that she had promised her that he would soon return, after which she fell into a deep slumber from which the hands of the child-stealer had not roused her.

Mellie stolen?

It was a bold stroke by those who wanted the trail to Joel Jaxon's wealth and by his missing heir.

Hiram Hawk realized that he had a bitter enemy to fight, one who, though he believed him dead, was playing a cool hand against justice aided by the cunning of the Sons of Simon.

He turned away and bade Parker good-night at the door.

No time was to be lost.

If he would find Mellie and find her alive he must take the trail at once even if he was compelled to resurrect himself and appear in the field against Hiram, the Vidocq of Harlem.

The man who had committed the theft was not Doctor Velvet.

The cunning head of the Sons of Simon had not entered the house in Harlem and carried off the trance-child; another's hands had performed this act.

An hour after quitting the house, Hiram Hawk might have been seen regarding a house not far from Union Square.

He knew that Doctor Velvet sometimes called this place one of his numerous homes, that here he was to be found at certain times, and that to this house the Sons of Simon had crept at all hours of the night for consultation, if not for anything worse.

The clock in the vicinity sent its eleven strokes out on the cool night air, but the man on guard did not move, but remained a statue on the pavement.

With his eyes fixed upon the house which was a two-story brick, he watched it, taking note of all who approached it.

No one stopped, and as yet he had seen no signs of its being inhabited.

More than once he thought of Nancy Nabbs.

What had become of the woman who had taken refuge in his house to quit it with Parker when she rushed forth after the eagle who had robbed the dove-cote?

Had she followed the cab and its tenants to its stop? Had she discovered whither the man had taken the trance-child, and was she now trying to rescue the little one?

At last there appeared in one of the upper windows of the brick house a light as if a jet had just been turned on.

Hiram Hawk saw it the moment the light revealed itself and kept his eyes fastened upon the window.

It remained for a moment in the room beyond the window and then all became dark again.

Three minutes afterward the door opened and a man came forth.

He stopped on the step, took a careful survey of the vicinity and moved off.

"It is the Captain himself," said the man on guard, and he was after him like a fox.

Captain Velvet, recognized by his build and step, did not seem to realize that he was followed.

He did not try to keep in the shadows of the building as he moved along, but walked erect, as he always did, and made good headway.

Hiram Hawk tracked him across Union Square in the glimmer of the lights there and down Fourteenth street.

He landed him on Eighth avenue and after a long chase saw him enter a building not very imposing or cleanly.

Captain Velvet seemed to stop midway up the staircase beyond the hall door and listen.

Hiram Hawk waited till he heard him go on again and then he glided to the door and slipped in.

It was dangerous, he knew, to follow a desperate man into an unknown house, but he was all nerve and the thought of Mellie being in the hands of the Sons of Simon was enough to send him into the very heart of danger.

He did not see Captain Velvet walk down a hall on the second floor and knock lightly at a door.

Quick footsteps came forward and the next moment the portal was opened.

Into the room slipped the head of the Sons of Simon and immediately the door was closed and locked.

There was little light in the room, but what little there was showed Captain Velvet a man with a blotchy face and eager, restless eyes.

On a low couch at one side of the room and upon an overcoat lay a sleeping child.

She looked out of place in that apartment, none too clean, and her surroundings would have made Hiram Hawk grate his teeth.

The man who admitted Captain Velvet pointed toward the little one and the master went forward.

He stood over the couch and looked with a keen eye upon the child, and turned slowly upon his companion.

"I didn't tell you to do this, you know," said he, half out of humor.

"No; but the opportunity was so grand. I found her right to my hand, and I couldn't help picking her up."

Captain Velvet bent lower and listened to the soft breathings of the trance-child.

"She's like her mother in the face," he muttered. "If that mother knew—"

He stopped suddenly and turned upon Con.

"Were you followed?" he asked.

"Yes; they were on the watch, though for a moment I caught them napping. I was followed, but the woman, Parker, fainted at the side of the hack as we started, and we must have distanced her if she even recovered in time to pursue."

"Where was Noodles, the spy?"

"I saw him quit the house before I played my little cards. I made sure of him first."

Captain Velvet's face seemed to grow more eager as he looked down at the child once more. He seemed to realize that a great point had been gained, that the sword of victory had been placed in his hand, and falling back he exclaimed:

"With this little one in our hands we can go straight to the mark! But if Hiram Hawk were alive we would be in danger."

Con grinned as if to say: "Have no fears on that score, Captain."

CHAPTER XXV.

HIRAM HAWK'S NIGHT TRAIL.

BEYOND the door of Con's den stood the shadower.

He knew what door had opened for Captain Velvet and he doubted not that the cunning head of the Sons of Simon had met some companion beyond the threshold, but he did not investigate.

He even drew off and waited for the man to come forth.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed and he heard no sounds come from the room.

What was taking place there?

At length the door opened slowly and a face looked out.

Hiram Hawk, at the further end of the corridor, which was quite narrow, saw a broad face and a pair of eager, watchful eyes that looked toward him as if in search of a spy, but saw none.

It was not the face of Captain Velvet, therefore it must be the one Parker saw pressed against the glass door of the cab.

In another instant the door had closed

again and the silent, statuesque man waited on.

There was patience in every thing this cool head did. Those who knew him best knew that he was noted for this very trait. He could wait and work; he could watch with no outward signs of impatience, and his friends said that the Harlem sport could watch a man all night and not yawn.

"That door will open again," said Hiram to himself as it closed and the face vanished. "I can afford to wait for I have tracked the head of the Sons of Simon to one of the nests of the vultures."

By and by some one came up the stairs and came his way.

One of the roomers of the building.

Hiram saw that he was aiming at the very door near which he stood and in a moment he fell back and looked at him.

"What are you doing here?" asked this man. "By Jove! where have I seen you before?"

The detective made no answer, but stood stiffly erect before the half-intoxicated man and waited for him to go on.

"Come in. I live in this nest," he continued at last, finding the key-hole and opening the door. "I'm Reuben Flynn. Don't you recollect the night we met on the Bridge? I was carrying a bundle; it was during the hunt for Old Levi's diamonds and you, I know those eyes—can't deceive me, you know—"

Hiram knew the man now.

"It's all right. You're not after me, are you?"

"I am not."

"But you are watching some one who lives in the trap?"

"That depends who lives here."

"I know 'em all."

"The man down at the other end of the hall?"

"Him not quite as well as some of the others. You mean the man with the blotchy face?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's Con."

"How long has he lived here?"

"Came last month, got the last room in the trap and, I guess, pays up."

"Are you on terms with him?"

"I play with him sometimes. We have a quiet game now and then, when neither of us have any thing pressing, you see."

"Would you mind going down there now and look into his room, say, under pretense of hunting a game?"

"Do you want Con?"

The trailer of Harlem bent suddenly toward the man before him. He knew the value of the present moment.

"If you help me a little it will come back to you with interest in the future," he said, earnestly. "I didn't do anything with you only stop you on the Bridge."

"No, and I've been everlastingly grateful ever since," was the quick response. "What was it you wanted me to do? Go down and pretend to be hunting a game with Con, but, in reality, to get a peep into his room just now."

"You have the idea exactly."

The suspect started toward the door, but stopped at the detective's voice.

"Take a good survey of the room," said he.

"I'll see everything in it, even to the flies on the walls."

Hiram smiled and Reuben Flynn was gone.

It was trusting a "suspect," a man who, like Con and his companion, was a criminal, but he had trusted such people before.

He settled back in the chair and waited.

Five minutes later footsteps approached the door and the man came back.

He shut the door behind him before he spoke.

"Whose child have they got in there?" were his words.

"They?" ejaculated Hiram, pretending surprise.

"Con isn't the only one in that room. He has a man with him and they have a child sitting up in a chair with her little hands resting on a sheet of paper on the other man's lap, and—and—"

"The villains!" broke in the shadow-sport, as he left his chair and stood for a moment

with clinched hands in the middle of the chamber.

"Con came to the door, bounded across the room at my rap, and I was permitted but a peep, but as I told you I'd see everything in there, so I did."

"That's enough, Reuben."

"But the child? Whose can it be?"

"We will answer that question in the near future. They were not treating her roughly, were they?"

"No, but she looked frightened, you know. Her face was white and thin, and the strange man seemed to be holding her wrists, but he had turned his head and was looking toward the door while I chatted with Con."

"That will do," said Hiram.

"Where do you think they ran across the little one?"

"Would Con steal a child?"

"I don't know whether he'd go that far, but he's a man who serves for money without asking many questions and—"

"Could be hired to kidnap?"

"Like others, Con is 'on the make,' but the man with him, a fine looker—I don't know him."

Hiram Hawk paused a moment and then continued, lowering his voice:

"Did you ever steal a child, Reuben Flynn?" he asked.

"Me? Steal a child?" and the suspect drew back. "Why, what makes you put me in the same catalogue with Con?"

"I was simply asking a question."

"I never steal children; there you have it!"

"But you're not too old to begin."

"How's that?"

"I say you're not too old to play the same sort of a hand Con may have played somewhere."

"But, heavens! you don't expect me to begin now?"

"Listen to me. I want the little one now in the hands of Con and his friend."

"Go down and demand it."

"No, that won't do under the circumstances."

"Wait till they're asleep."

"That might take time."

"You're right."

In another moment both men heard the closing of a door and Reuben Flynn opened his a little.

"Here comes Con, heading straight for my den!" he exclaimed, falling back.

Hiram Hawk sprung up again and bounded toward a lot of garments that hung from their hooks and trailed to the floor.

Flynn grated his teeth and held the knob of the door till the clothes had ceased to shake, at which time the footsteps in the outside hall halted at the portal.

When he opened the door Con slipped forward and crossed the threshold.

"I'm out of matches, Reuben," said he. "I thought I had a lot, but the box is empty. Could you loan me a few?"

Hiram Hawk knew from the tones that it was all a blind, that the speaker had taken that plan to get a sudden look around Reuben Flynn's den.

"I'll give you twenty, Con," said the suspect, diving into one of his pockets and bringing up a lot of lucifers.

Con lingered.

"Where do you buy your matches, Reuben?" he asked.

"Pick 'em up anywhere, sometimes from old Davy on the corner, and now and then from little Daisy down on the street."

"They're sure fire, eh?"

"Never had one to go back on me yet."

"How much a box, Reuben?"

"A fiver."

"I see they have good ends, lots of crackum, you know."

"Plenty of that, and they never fail you."

Con seemed to think that he had exhausted his question-box, and drew toward the door.

"Drop in, say, in an hour, if you want a little game. I'll be alone then; have a friend with me just now, an old acquaintance who dropped in unexpectedly."

Flynn nodded and saw the man vanish. But just beyond the door the footsteps halted, and then seemed to glide back along the wall.

Reuben Flynn held his finger to his lip as

the old garments parted and the keen-eyed ferret of Harlem looked out.

Con was listening in the hall, listening with the ears of a lynx and with the mien of a tiger.

He leaned toward the door with his red hands tightly shut, and his eyes almost starting from his head in their eagerness, and his broad chest heaved with his laborious breathing.

Surely the man suspected that Flynn's visit to his room had a double meaning.

But he moved away at last. Flynn heard him walk down the hall and open his own door.

"What do you think now?" exclaimed the suspect, as Hiram emerged from his prison. "That talk about matches was all fudge. He never is without 'em. He don't know that I saw him buy a box from little Daisy on the street but last night, and a man don't use five hundred lucifers in that time."

"It was only a reconnaissance, nothing more. He wanted to see if the coast was clear; he suspected that you were not alone."

"Do you think he satisfied himself that I was not?"

"I don't think he believes it now. At any rate, he is back with his friend. You have been invited to a quiet game with him in his room in an hour."

"Which means that then there will be no child there, and no man with the handsome face."

"Just so."

Reuben Flynn looked at the detective more than ever puzzled. He did not know what to think.

"It beats me," he blurted out at last. "You may know what all this means, but I—I give it up."

"We will wait awhile. You may have your game after all. You may win a little stake from Con before morning."

"I'd rather see the child out of their hands, for it means mischief."

Hiram made no reply to this, but remained silent a little spell.

No sounds came from toward Con's door; and the whole house seemed quiet.

It was a lucky accident after all, that he had run across this suspect, who was under some obligations to him.

The man was quite sober now, and his brain seemed clear, but the presence of the child in Con's room bothered him.

"Gods! he's coming again!" suddenly cried Flynn, bounding to his door before Hiram Hawk could seek the friendly screen of the old clothes.

"What is it, Con?" asked Reuben, as he reached the door, the key of which he caught and held like a vise.

"I want to see you, quick, Reuben!"

The door opened, but the body of the suspect was interposed between Con and the light.

"Where's your visitor?"

"My visitor? I—I—"

"Yes, the man you're playing for to-night! Give me the truth or I'll paint the door with your brains!"

Reuben Flynn recoiled with a cry from the revolver that confronted him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LITTLE MELLIE BETRAYS HIRAM.

"You have not been alone all this time," continued Con, of the Sons of Simon, still threatening Flynn with the six-shooter.

"I should like to know why I haven't," was the answer.

"You must let me search your room."

It was a momentous time.

Hiram Hawk, the Harlem spotter, standing behind Reuben, heard these words and came forward with the tread of an eager man.

"I will search your trap, and if you have some one concealed in it—some spy, mind you, you shall pay for it."

The next moment the detective sprang forward like a cat, and Con of the Sons found a pair of hands at his throat while he was carried against the wall and held there.

The revolver was knocked down and the stern eyes of the disguised ferret looked at him until he thought he saw sparks fly from their depths.

Reuben Flynn joined in the detectives

sudden attack, and between them the man was hustled from the room and thrown bodily into the hall.

Con rose to his feet swearing like a trooper, and the following moment he was heard slinking down the corridor toward his own room.

"Did he know you?" eagerly inquired Reuben.

"I think not. At least he showed no signs of it."

"He will tell his friend what has happened and they may come back together."

"No danger of the other man entering this room to see who I am," said Hiram. "If he has not already made his way from the building he will get out of it now."

They waited quite a little while for Con's return, but they did not hear him, and by and by Reuben ventured to sneak down the hall and listened at the man's door.

He could see above the transom that the light had been lowered, and this breathed of desertion, and at last he applied his eye to the keyhole and swept the interior of the room to no purpose. He could see no one.

"Both men are gone and with them the child," remarked Hiram Hawk, when Reuben reported to him.

It turned out to be just this way, for a fuller investigation revealed the fact that the den inhabited by Con was deserted and that Mellie the trance-child had gone off with the couple.

Hiram bade Flynn good-night and went out immediately.

Doctor Velvet and his man had outwitted him, but the determined ferret secretly vowed that it should not be for long.

He saw no signs of them on the street, and after awhile he moved off on what he thought was a fairly-outlined trail.

A boy, one of the night Arabs of the streets of New York, had seen two men on the sidewalk near the building and one carried something in his arms.

The episode in Reuben Flynn's room had alarmed the two men at the further end of the hall, and upon Con's return preparations for flight were made at once.

"We can go to the brick," said the Captain. "There we can continue our investigations."

"But the child may cry."

"Never mind that. I am not hypnotist for nothing," and he smiled as he looked at his man.

They slipped from the room and down to the street. They moved away with a good deal of caution, Con the watch-dog in the rear, with all his senses on the alert.

Half an hour later all three were housed in another place where a cheerful fire chased away all sensations of chilliness, and the Captain placed the little one in a chair.

Wearied and weak as the child was, her eyes burned with unwonted luster, and Con drew back and watched the proceedings.

Captain Velvet removed his gloves and touched the pink eyelids with the tips of his fingers and almost immediately Mellie seemed to pass into unconsciousness.

For half a minute she did not seem to breathe, and then her lips parted, while Captain Velvet stole a hasty glance toward Con.

"What do you see, child?" asked the hypnotizer.

The little head turned uneasily on the pillow and the lips seemed to hesitate.

"I see a man," at last they muttered.

"Where is he?"

"He is in a little room, but he is not alone."

"Oho!" exclaimed the Doctor with a smile.

"Let me know who is with him."

"His companion is a young girl and he is telling her something that greatly excites her."

"Gods! it may be the one we want," cried Con, starting a little, but a glance from Captain Velvet silenced him.

"Go on," he said gently to the trance-child.

"The young girl is fair to look upon, but the young man is not so handsome."

"What is he like?"

"He has a thin face and it is rather dark. His hands are also thin and he talks fast and low."

"It must be Noodles."

Con could not keep back the guess, but Captain Velvet did not look up this time.

"Have you ever seen the man before?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," and the shadow of a smile came to the little lips. "I have seen him many times. I know who he is. It is Noodles."

"I thought so," cried Con.

"But where is he just now? In what particular house is Noodles, whom you have just seen?"

"I must go outside to look at the nearest lamp and then at the number over the door."

"Of course. I will let you out. Are you upon the street now?"

"I see the light at the corner, but first let me look at the number of the house. It is a little house and the door is almost black, so that the number is not very plain. It is number 677 and the name of the street is II—"

Both men looked at each other with a sudden start and Con's gaze seemed full of amazement.

"Ask her to describe the girl who is with Noodles and then we will know what we have found," he whispered.

Captain Velvet turned once more to the trance-child and leaned forward.

He asked her to describe the companion to whom Noodles was talking and she did so in simple but effective words which startled the men still more.

"'Tis she!" cried Velvet. "There is no doubt of it, Con. We have found her at last and all we have to do is to lay hands on her at the right time."

"The little thing is worth her weight in gold," ejaculated Con. "What would we have done without her?"

"Failed, perhaps," grinned the head of the Sons of Simon.

"Now, if you can, switch her off on the other trail. Ask her to go back and enter Reuben Flynn's room. What a marvelous child she is! No wonder Hiram Hawk of Harlem won so many victories."

Again the soft fingers of Captain Velvet touched the transparent lids and Mellie turned to him with a smile.

With the arts of the hypnotizer he guided her back to the house from which they had last taken her, but a shudder seemed to pass over her frame.

"She doesn't like this part of the job," thought Con. "We are getting upon very important ground now."

"You are in a house now?" said Velvet.

"A large, old house, and you have led me to a dark hall."

"Go to the end of it. See! I hold your hand. There is a door here; it is shut."

"I see. Do you want me to look beyond it?"

"Yes. Are you there now?"

"I am in a little room not very clean and I see two men. One is about to go out."

"What is he like?"

"He is rather tall and wears a beard which he seems to push to one side ere he leaves."

"A false beard!" said the listening Con.

Captain Velvet nodded.

"Follow this man. Don't lose sight of him. I will hold your hand, child."

Mellie appeared to obey for several minutes, during which time she was closely watched by the two men.

"Have you tracked him for me, child?" asked Captain Velvet.

"I have lost him."

"What, lost that man?"

"I don't see him any longer."

"But go back to the house again and begin over. You must find him for me."

It was evident that the effects of the trial were wearing off, and that Captain Velvet was losing his grip.

"What does that mean?" asked Con.

"Simply that I have asked her to track down some one to whom she is greatly attached."

"It was not Noodles for she uncovered him; it was not Joel Jaxon's heir, for she showed her with Noodles."

The head of the Sons of Simon did not speak.

He turned again to the trance-child and made the hypnotic passes before her face as before.

"I will put forth all my power. She must tell me where that man went from Reuben Flynn's room and show me who he is."

Mellie in her feeble way tried to resist the powers of the hypnotist, but she could not.

Con smiled when he saw her go back into the depths of the fatal slumber, and he waited impatiently until the spell could be renewed.

Minutes seemed hours to him, but at last when Captain Velvet spoke to Mellie he took hope and bent forward with eager mien.

"You have found him again, haven't you?"

"I see the same man."

"That is good. Now, where is he?"

"He is watching a house which stands behind some trees that grow near the gutter."

"Heavens!" cried Con, drawing back and glancing toward the window.

Captain Velvet threw up a warning finger, and the man stood like a statue in the middle of the room.

"What is the house like? Is it frame or brick, child?"

"It is a two-story brick. I see that the shutters are tightly closed, and the man is half hidden by the tree behind which he stands."

"How many trees are growing near the curb before the house?"

"I see three."

"Gods! it must be—"

Con checked himself, for the child's lips were moving again.

"I have entered the house," she was saying. "I have just opened a door and am in a large room where there are two men and a child."

Con fell back again with a startling cry upon his lips, and his face was white, ghastly.

"He's tracked us down! The man screened by Flynn, the liar, is out there!"

He pointed excitedly toward the door, and would have rushed into the hall but for his master's look.

Captain Velvet settled back into his chair and looked across the room.

His hands fell from all contact with Mellie's person, and the deep little eyes unclosed and their owner sighed.

"Do you know who he is?" questioned Con, and his hand fell upon Doctor Velvet's shoulder.

"I know."

"He can't be the ferret who was left in the little house, with the fuse flashing toward his chair."

"The house was found in ashes."

"There was an explosion, and the man was on the verge of death when abandoned to his fate."

Captain Velvet nodded.

"Then, in the name of common sense, who is out there behind the tree, as the child has indicated?"

"Who would be there if he were living?"

"Hiram Hawk, the shadow of Harlem; the man who was blown up with the little house!"

Captain Velvet sprung to his feet.

"He may have escaped. I believe that the spy out there is the man from Harlem!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FERRET GETS BACK HIS OWN.

The man outside was the man from Harlem.

Betrayed by Mellie, the trance-child, though he knew it not, Hiram Hawk kept his position behind the tree while he watched the house in which he believed Captain Velvet and Con had taken refuge with the little one.

As yet he had not caught a glimpse of the pair in the house, but the light seen beyond the window of the room in which the Captain was working his hypnotic spell convinced him that he was on the right trail.

Con started toward the door with the last words from his master's lips, but halted there and seemed to hesitate.

"It's like going out and tackling one who has come back from the dead," muttered the half-superstitious fellow with a shiver.

"You're not afraid, are you?" and a cynical smile came to Captain Velvet's lips and lingered there.

"Afraid? Not of flesh and blood, Captain."

With another look at the child, the chief of the Sons of Simon rose and pushed Con aside.

There was the tiger in his eyes, and his face seemed to have turned deathly white in an instant.

"I will go!" said he through set teeth. "I will go, coward."

He reached the hall and glided toward the front door, when all at once a wild cry in the room stopped him, and he and Con ran back.

Mellie lay on the floor, face downward as she had fallen from the chair, and the moment Captain Velvet saw her he seemed to know what had happened.

He had overtaxed the little one's powers and the collapse had come.

He bent over and picked her up, at the same time noting the pallor of her face and the wildly set eyes.

Con fell back in alarm.

"She is dying!" he gasped.

Velvet bore her to the nearest sofa and wiped her slimy lips with his handkerchief, then turning to his companion he said:

"Remember the man out there! It may be the human Phoenix of New York."

Con sprung to the door again and disappeared into the hall where Captain Velvet heard his footsteps a moment longer.

"There's no one behind the trees," reported the slave when he came back.

"You looked good, did you?"

"I used my eyes as best I could. I looked behind each tree."

"No sign of a spy, eh?"

"None."

"But you know what the child said?"

"She may have misled you."

"It would be nice if I could think so," he remarked. "I have hypnotized many people in my time and I was never deceived or misled by a single one."

"But there was no man out there when I opened the door."

Captain Velvet walked into the hall himself and Con followed like a dog at his master's heels.

"Look for yourself," said the latter. "If you can see any one at the tree you will do better than I did."

The door was opened and the chief of the Sons of Simon looked carefully out.

"Let's go and see closer," and he left the house and crept like a bloodhound around the trees with head lowered and eyes on the alert.

"Look here—tracks!" said he, suddenly pointing at the foot of one tree.

Con bent down and looked for a second.

"I see. Some one has been here."

"What do you think now?"

The man said nothing.

"Our little patient saw this man at the tree."

"It does look that way."

"She saw him there and told us so. A spy has been near the house."

"And may be in it now."

Captain Velvet sprung back and cleared the steps at a bound as if Con's words had gone through him like a knife.

"He has been here!" he cried as Con entered the parlor behind him. "Don't you see the child is gone?"

An open door that led to the rear of the house stood ajar, and, revolver in hand, the figure of Captain Velvet shot from the room as an exclamation of vengeance goaded him on.

Mellie had vanished!

Out through the room into which he plunged went Captain Velvet, and into the back yard attached to the premises.

"She is gone!" he grated, stopping at last and waiting for his companion to come up.

"What say you now? The fuse must have failed at the last moment."

"But the house was blown up."

"Wiped out by fire," was the reply.

"You went up there the next morning and saw the ruins."

Con nodded.

"You saw the timbers all charred and broken; you saw the firemen take from the cellar a lot of burnt bones—"

"I saw all that, Captain. Then, in the name of heaven, how can the Harlem ferret have escaped?"

"Say you that this is not his work—that he has not carried away the prize you took

from his house? Who else would follow you? Not the woman who fainted at the wheels of your cab—not Parker? No, no! This is a man's work. We have the bloodhound of Harlem still on the trail."

"Where is Fergus?"

"Never mind Fergus," answered Captain Velvet. "We must do without him now."

"And circumvent that man?"

"Certainly. He has turned the tables on us. Somehow he has struck your trail."

"He may have been the man concealed by Reuben."

"Doubtless. You should have played a fuller hand."

"What more could I do than I did?" bitterly retorted Con. "I was thrown into the hall by a pair of arms stronger even than mine—"

"This detective is called an agile athlete."

"Then it was he!"

Con looked downcast and chagrined for a moment, when he suddenly sprung back, exclaiming:

"We must beat him at once. We must not let him get home with the trance-child."

"Stop him if you can!" derisively cried Captain Velvet. "It is too late for that."

He is well toward home with her. If you had not robbed the nest we would not have been discovered by this old enemy."

Con drew himself to his full height and glared at his master with the fury of a wild beast.

"If you can do without the services of Con from this moment you may do so," he said. "I thought I was serving you when I robbed the house in Harlem, and a while ago you thanked me for doing so; but now I did wrong."

The speaker was at the door and was in the act of opening it when the hand of Captain Velvet grasped his arm.

"Stop! Another step on the pain of being struck from the rolls of the Sons of Simon as a traitor!" he said hoarsely.

"You wouldn't do that, Captain?"

"Try your master and see."

Con looked him in the eye and seemed to read his inmost thoughts. He thought he knew the man he had served for three years; he thought he knew the soul of Doctor Velvet, but he knew very little about it.

"What must I do?" he asked, coming back abashed.

"I am going to send you on another trip."

Con folded his arms and waited for orders. Was he to be sent back to Harlem? was he to be sent up there upon another errand which might end disastrously to him and to the Sons of Simon?

He would go if sent, for he feared the man he had braved for a minute; but he did not care to cross Harlem River on another expedition in the dark.

"You heard what the child said about Noodles and the young girl, to whom she saw him talking?" continued Captain Velvet.

A slight nod attested that Con was listening.

"You will proceed thither. You will find the girl. You will discover with whom she lives, if she is not alone. She may, after all, be the companion of Felix, the Jew, whose trap we plundered not long ago, but got nothing. But Felix cannot inhabit the house in H— street unless he has moved thither since our visit."

"And you?"

"You may find me here when you come back, or you may not. If you do not find me here, place a bit of paper in the niche against the chimney-corner yonder, and I will get it."

Con said good-night and passed from the house, watched eagle-like by the cold-faced man left behind.

Captain Velvet stood for another minute at the table and looked out into the hall.

"There is no doubt that that man still lives," he muttered in low tones. "He did not perish in the house we destroyed after making it a trap for him. Fortune, or his good angel interfered. He is still the sleuthhound of Harlem, still looking into the mystery of the death in the Nest. I'll see Fergus first."

He quitted the house and went down the street with watchful eyes to turn into the Bowery half an hour later and soon after-

ward to run into a hallway which was dimly lighted and quiet.

He knew nothing of Fergus's death at the Emergency Hospital, much less that Hiram Hawk had seen the man die with a falsehood on his lips—a lie intended to shield him (Captain Velvet) from the vengeance of the law.

The chief of the Sons of Simon went up to the third floor and stopped at a door near the end of the silent corridor.

He opened this door with a pass-key as if he was a frequent visitor and slipped into the room.

"Fergus?" he asked, without striking a light.

There came no reply and then he lit a match and turned on the gas.

He saw that things had not been disturbed for some time. The pipe lay half-filled on the table, and the couch at one side of the room had not been tumbled since he saw it last, for a newspaper which he had noticed there was lying as he had left it.

Captain Velvet looked with his eyes seeming to start from his head, for nothing seemed to solve the mystery, and at last he moved over to the table and looked at things there.

What had become of Fergus?

"The man may not have found Nancy at home," he said at last. "He was to seek her and scare the secret out of her if he could get at it no other way; but—"

He stopped of his own accord and seemed to shiver.

"What if she handed Fergus over to the police?"

He went to the door and thence from the little room which told him nothing, and a minute afterward his footsteps might have been heard on the stair-case.

Captain Velvet seemed to be in the shadow of some great evil to his cause. He did not look like himself as he glided over the sidewalk and those who saw him may have wondered what gave him such eager strides.

It was not back to the brick-house, but into a night restaurant not very far from Fergus's den.

It was Fergus's eating-house and he was well known there.

Doctor Velvet went down to the furthest end of the dining-room and waited for the waiter. He had taken a seat at Fergus's table and kept silent till the waiter came.

"When was little Fergus here last?" he asked.

"What, don't you know?" said the waiter. "We are not sure, of course; but it looks like Fergus has got into a scrape."

Captain Velvet held his own well. "Into what sort of scrape?" he asked.

"There's no woman in it, for Fergus—"

"There's a lioness in the scrape I'm talking about," was the response. "It's here in the paper. Dick happened to see it and he wanted to bet a dinner that it was Fergus from the description."

He took a paper from the rack and picked out the paragraph for Captain Velvet. The chief of the Sons of Simon read the brief account of the event at Nancy Nabbs's house, and then looked up with a start.

"Oh, that's not our Fergus," he said to the waiter; but away down in his heart he knew that Fergus was at the Emergency Hospital and, according to the newspaper, in the shadow of death.

Fit seemed to be swooping down upon the Sons of Simon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BOOTLESS SWOOP.

NANCY NABBS had failed to follow the abductor of little Mellie to the place to which he transported the child.

Whether or not the driver of the hack which carried the pursuer was in league with the one who drove Con and his victim, Nancy found herself set down in a dark portion of the city after having been carried about for an hour.

The bewildered woman alighted and demanded to know what had become of the hack she had followed or supposed she had, and the grinning Jehu replied by saying he did not know and in turn asked for an enormous fee which staggered the good woman.

Still carrying upon her person the gems

which she had revealed to Letty Stokes, Nancy feared to refuse the demand and after satisfying it saw the cab move off again.

She wondered what had become of the child-stealer and his little victim, and after awhile she walked off, hoping against hope to be guided to some definite place by the first policeman encountered.

In this she was partly successful, and some time later she entered a portion of the city quite familiar to her.

In fact it was the part she inhabited, and thinking at once of her home she sought it out and entered to discover that it had not suffered greatly by the fire occasioned by her thrilling holding of the lamp.

"They'll come back for me, I know it; but that man won't," said Nancy. "I think he got quite enough of it and won't come round bothering me soon. I wonder how he likes a light in his face, the mean cur? The next time, should he come back, it won't be a lamp, but something worse."

Still eager to find out what had become of little Mellie, the detective's charge, Nancy Nabbs resolved to go back to the house in Harlem in hopes that some information had been obtained, but just as she was about to quit the house a footstep was heard and the door opened slowly.

It was Noodles.

Nancy fell back at seeing Noodles in her house when he had a right to believe it untenanted, and the moment the ferret's spy saw her he gave a prolonged whistle and shook his head.

"I thought I left you up in Harlem," said he.

"So you did, and if you had remained at home you might have prevented a miserable crime."

"How's that?"

Nancy proceeded and related all she knew of the trance-child's abduction and was once or twice interrupted by the impatient Noodles.

"Gone, you say? Mellie?" he cried.

"Gone, slick and clean! Actually stolen out of the house by a rascal and carried away right under Parker's eyes."

Noodles could hardly believe it, but Nancy's mien gave the seal of truth to her narrative and he was forced to take it for such.

"At once!" exclaimed Noodles, looking toward the door. "No grass shall grow under Noodles's feet in this matter."

"Do you know where to look for her?"

"Don't I?" laughed the spy.

"Then go at once," and Nance pushed him across the room. "If you know where she might be, don't lose any time. I'll watch here for what turns up. Here's where I hit the man with the lamp, and—"

"What if the cops come and take you in for it?"

"They'll be doing me a favor, for where they take me the Sons of Simon can't come for vengeance."

"That's true," put in Noodles. "I guess you can take care of yourself, Nabbs," and with this he left the house, and Nancy shut the door and locked it from the inside.

Noodles had been gone just forty minutes when another footstep came to Nancy Nabbs's door, and she went over to it, bending forward, but not until she had lowered the light in the room.

It was not far from midnight now.

She listened there with all her senses on the alert, and at last discovered that some one was outside.

At length a light rap sounded on the door.

"Who's there?"

"Is that you, Nabbs?"

Nancy tried to think if she had ever heard the voice before, but concluded she had not.

"Who's there, I say?"

"If it's you, Nabbs—"

"It may be Nabbs, and it may not," answered Nancy, cautiously.

"I may be Petrel, and I may not."

The hand of the lone woman flew to the key, but she hesitated.

Now, she had a brother once who went by the nickname of "Petrel," but it was long before she settled in Gotham, and but few had ever heard of him.

The name of Petrel sent a thrill through every fiber of her frame, and she wanted to

open the door, but something told her that it might be a stratagem.

"You don't tell me that you're Petrel," she said through the door.

"I said I may be Petrel. If you don't care to open the door I can forget that I ever had a sister Nancy."

Again the woman laid her hand upon the key, but again something seemed to hold her back.

"If you're Petrel you will sing one verse of that old song we used to sing when we was little ones in Jersey."

Then she fell to listening with a grim smile on her face, while the clock on the mantel sent its ticks through the silent room.

That would try him.

If Petrel was out there he would recall the old songs of their childhood, if not she would discover the fraud.

A minute's silence fell between them, and Nancy waited to the end.

Suddenly a key seemed to creep into the lock and she drew back with flashing eyes.

"It is not Petrel! The test was too severe," she grinned.

Her own key met the alien one half-way and put a stop to its work.

All at once the other key was withdrawn and Nancy heard the same footsteps move off.

She longed to open the door and look out, but restrained her curiosity and congratulated herself upon her acumen.

Undoubtedly she had saved herself from an unwelcome visitor as she would have seen if she could have peeped out and caught sight of the figure that went up into the light of the street lamps.

The man slipped away.

With a scowl on his handsome face he went off looking back only once to say:

"I hardly expected to find the old woman at home after her tussle with Fergus, but when I did and found the door locked I thought of her brother who has been resting among the sands of the tropics these thirty years. But even that wouldn't work, for she tested me in an unexpected manner. I didn't know what songs they used to sing, and by no other pass-word could I have walked across her threshold to-night. Some other time, Nancy Nabbs; yes, at another time I will see you and play out the little game your shrewdness has delayed."

Nabbs's intended visitor was no other than Doctor Velvet the chief of the Sons of Simon, and if the lone woman could have looked into his darkly handsome face she might have realized what she had escaped.

Captain Velvet made his way into another part of the city and turned up again in the brick house.

This time he was alone there; no Mellie to sit before him and betray her best friend under the mystical influence of his accursed arts, and no Con to stand by and look on.

Con had been sent away on another mission and would come back by and by.

If Hiram Hawk had risen from the dead and recaptured little Mellie the trance child he would be overtaken in time, and the great detective would yet learn that the Sons of Simon never left a trail till they stood triumphant at the end of it.

Tired of waiting for Con's return, though he remained up smoking and thinking till long past midnight, Captain Velvet went to bed.

He would hear from Con some time. He trusted the cunning man he had sent upon an important errand, and he would tell him where the missing heiress lived.

Morning came.

The gray streaks on another day seemed to come up the Bay to reveal the spires of Gotham.

Captain Velvet still slept.

When he tumbled from bed at last and walked into the sumptuously appointed parlor he pressed a button set in the wall near the fireplace and a little door opened.

Thrusting his hand into this niche, he drew forth a bit of folded paper, which he carried to the window.

A glance at the scrawl told him that Con had been there, and the more he read the whiter grew his face.

It was a scrawl indeed, for Con was no penman, and Captain Velvet had to halt now and then over the words, for the document

seemed to have been written on some one's knee.

"CAPTAIN V—"

"I have found where she lives. It is not with the old Jew, but with a woman whom I don't know. Some one must have taken her from the old Jew's den and fetched her to H—street. Felix isn't with her, neither is he in the old trap, which is deserted. I hadn't much trouble in finding out what I did, but I have other news. Fergus is dead. He passed in his chips, and death cashed 'em at the 'Mergency Hospital. He was all burnt by a woman, who threw a lamp at him, and I guess I don't want to see her. I have half a notion to give up the fight, we come on so poorly now, and since that human wolf of the trail isn't dead, I don't keer to fall into his hands. Good by, Captain. Take good care of number one, if you still make the fight; but this man is too much for me. Con."

Captain Velvet grated his teeth over this letter.

His hands crushed it as though it were an egg-shell, and the next moment he had flung it into the fire with a rasping curse.

"I didn't think he'd have the nerve to abandon me after the threat I made," he said aloud. "I thought I could hold him a little while longer, for I needed him. Well, if we meet again, there will be a settlement that may last Mr. Conway a long time."

For a moment after this Doctor Velvet was silent, when he suddenly laughed.

"Why didn't I think of it? There won't be anything to divide now," he suddenly exclaimed. "It will all be mine. Mine! That has a fine sound, and three millions are better in my pocket than one-half of it in Con's."

He threw himself into an arm-chair and crossed his legs as he smoked.

The morning advanced.

The postman came and rung; he went to the door and received a letter, which looked as though it had been carried in the writer's pocket a few days prior to mailing.

Captain Velvet took it back to the parlor and sat down again.

With hands not a whit nervous, he tore it open and looked down the page at the signature.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed. "If this had come a week sooner, I might have had help as good and true as that I've got from Fergus and Con. Is it too late yet? Can I make the deal with this new ally. How did he know I was here? But there are few things he don't know. A new partner, better than Fergus and more cunning than Con! I wonder when they opened the doors. We haven't met for ten years, and then I wasn't permitted to speak to him. What does he say."

He read the letter through without once lifting his head.

There was a bright light in his eye when he looked up, and for half a minute seemed to study the fire.

"I might divide with him, but maybe I wouldn't ask half," he murmured. "I have this ferret to fight alone if I don't go to this old friend with the soft hand and the iron nerve."

He drummed on the table with seven fingers, for one was missing, and smiled again.

"I'll send word. No, I'll go to him. The directions are here and down here in one corner is the secret sign he used to make in his old letters. It's all right, I guess. If not—"

He got up and paced the floor.

"It was a little risky in his addressing me by mail, but I guess he knows what he's about. I'll go to him, but not till night. No, not by day though all may be well. I won't risk a trip to this new friend in an old dress till after dark. If all is O. K., I'll be armed as I was not even with Fergus and Con at my elbows. Hiram Hawk, with all your cunning you are nothing to Vilas Velvet and this new ally who has been sent to him by fortune. I know him of old. And, by Jove! they've set him free in the nick of time."

He read the letter again and at last cast it into the fire, but not until he had photographed, as it were, every letter, word and phrase upon his brain.

And, then he took up a fresh cigar and while he smoked his eyes got a light in which triumph mingled with defiance.

The lion was dying hard.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TWO MATCHES AND—DEATH.

It was true that Con, ere he deserted his master, had discovered the new abode of Belle Natterby, whom Noodles persuaded to accompany him from Old Felix's den to an asylum where he believed she would be safe from the Sons of Simon.

She would not in all probability have been ferreted out by the keen eyes of Con but for the hypnotic powers of Captain Velvet, as practiced upon Mellie, the trance-child, as we have seen.

Belle was happy in the new place and Noodles was quite proud of his achievement.

But the shadow was near at hand, and Con, guided by Mellie's revelations, had penetrated the secret, as it were, and had discovered her.

After taking this information to his master, whom he found asleep, he slipped from the house, resolved to desert the cause, now that Fergus was dead and Hiram Hawk was very much alive.

If there was anything Con dreaded more than another it was the idea of being handed over to the workings of the law.

Cool-headed at all times, and possessed of an indomitable spirit, he yet feared the law, and the thought that he was pursued by a detective who never left a trail until he stood at the end of it, with all the threads in his hands, made his flesh actually creep.

Added to this was the superstition that some agency not altogether human had aided in the detective's escape from the trap in which the fuse was lighted, and Con thought best to get out of the game before the closing in.

But Captain Velvet would remain.

The stern head of the Sons of Simon—the man who had planned more than one dark piece of work and who had played a bold hand for Joel Jaxon's wealth—had not resolved to give it up, but on the contrary had determined to fight it out.

The letter received by him gave him renewed hope.

It was from a man whom he had not seen for years, but one whom he felt he could trust in anything desperate.

The writer was a bird of the Captain's feather, and this is why he assumed an air of triumph as if the game was already won.

The morning advanced and Doctor Velvet remained at home.

There was no need of his going out.

He would wait till night again came down over Gotham when he would glide from the house and seek the man who had written to him.

He read and smoked, looking from the window now and then as if watching the lengthening of the shadows, or counting the strokes of the nearest clock.

He wondered what had become of Con and what Hiram Hawk was doing since recapturing little Mellie?

Had he tested the child and had she by the gift of her wonderful powers told him where he (Doctor Velvet) was to be found?

Then he fell to thinking of Nancy Nabbs and wondered what she thought of his visit to her house.

And Letty Stokes? What had become of her after firing point-blank at his face?

Perhaps she thought she had committed murder and it was a miracle she had not, and had deserted the city never again to appear in the drama of money and crime.

These thoughts, we say, occupied Captain Velvet's mind the greater part of the day.

He saw the shadows grow long and the lamps once more aglow.

Twenty times during the last two hours he had looked at his watch.

Minutes seemed hours to this handsome, impatient man, and when he fell back from the window for the fortieth time, he smiled as if the hour had come.

Captain Velvet walked out of the room and put on another suit in his dressing apartment.

He clipped his beard before the mirror, donned a soft hat whose brim drooped over his brows and walked out.

He had resolved to see the writer of the letter, to make a new friend and ally, and at last to sweep from his path the keen ferrets, no matter from where they hailed.

Few close observers would have recognized the chief of the Sons of Simon as he hurried along underneath the gas.

While he hastened on, in another part of the city and in a little, foul-smelling room lay an old man on a cot of rags.

The beady eyes that snapped behind a pair of wrinkled cheeks and a hooked nose which seemed eager to overshadow his mouth, told that the old wretch was Felix the Jew.

It was not the same house in which we have seen him and Belle.

It was not the scene of the robbery and maltreatment, but another place worse than that one and full of odors which did not insult the olfactories of the old Jew.

Old Felix was alone.

Not only this, but he was near the end of a long life which had not always been spent in the interests of honesty.

The old man lay in the dark, too penurious to strike a light, though it would not have cost him anything, and at the same time he feared another invasion by those who wanted what he had.

He watched the little window where now and then the faint glimmer of the nearest street lamp fell, but he groaned out the remainder of his life like one in mortal agony.

"I don't know where she is, nor why she left me," he said. "I would have brought her to a safe place, but she had to run off with that thin-faced rascal who pretends to take an interest in her. I am left alone here and with the wealth of a king which he left in my hands for his child years ago."

Old Felix lifted himself upon one elbow and took a long survey of the dingy room.

"If I knew where to find her I'd creep out and do it," he went on. "I can't die here with the secret all mine and the wealth to be found by strangers after I'm gone. That would not be keeping the oath I took for Joel Jaxon. Merciful Father! I can't die here with this thing on my mind."

He crept from the dirty cot and staggered across the room.

He found the door and for a moment tried to open it, but he had locked it and the key was elsewhere.

"It's no use; I must perish here in the dark and alone!" he cried. "Why did Belle leave me and when will she come back?"

Once more he groped his way across the room and found the wall near the bed.

This seemed to guide him, for he caught the head of the couch and pulled it from the wall to slip behind it and drop upon his knees.

"It is here yet," he exclaimed, feeling something in his withered hands which he took from behind the bed. "I hold the bonds which are worth their weight in diamonds. I have millions in my clutch and they all belong to the girl. What if they fall into the hands of others? What if the Sons of Simon come here and find me dead and then search the house till they find the papers?"

He fell back and groaned at the thought of it.

For a full minute he knelt on the floor, clutching the papers in his hands and then fell face downward upon the bed.

It looked as though life had fled from the worn body, but it still flickered there.

"They will come. I know it. They will come and find the papers. Why I'd sooner beggar the girl and her lover than that the bonds should fall into the hands of the Sons of Simon. What, let my old enemy, Captain Velvet, find them and hug them to his bosom? I'd rather burn every paper in my hands!"

This new and diabolical idea seemed to take instant root in his mind.

He roused himself and crawled from the bed, still gripping the papers with vise-like clutch.

"She has always been poor as she knows and she can die that way. She sha'n't be robbed by the Sons of Simon—robbed over the dead body of Felix Levi. I will baffle the conspirators, and in the end bring all their schemes to naught. They shall not

open yon door and find me with the bonds in my possession, though I will be powerless to defend them any longer. I will burn every one!"

Desperate as was this determination the old Jew did not think it a crime.

He rose, tottered to the other wall and found there, near the only burner that gave light to the den-like room, a box of matches, one of which he seized with demoniac delight.

"Aha, I have it now. I have victory within my grasp though it beggars the girl," he chuckled. "I will make it all right with Joel when we meet. When we meet, ha, ha, ha!"

Old Felix watched the little flame increase and when the match had reached its height of fire he got down upon his knees on the floor and laid the papers in a pile before him.

There were many of these and he crowned the pile with a little packet which he reverently consigned to destruction.

This accomplished, the old Jew carried the blazing match toward the heap.

A fiendish expression settled down over his parchment-like face, his nose seemed to have gotten another crook, and his eyes scintillated like those of an asp.

But his fingers trembled.

The hand seemed averse to destroying so much wealth and it appeared as if death was coming to the rescue.

He smiled at the shy hands, pushed the match closer to the pile and dropped it upon it.

The match went out!

Old Felix groaned and started up after another.

He had not counted upon a disaster of this kind.

He found the box in the dark and fumbled there a little while with his palsied hands until the long fingers again gripped another lucifer.

"This time I have two matches," said he. "This time if one can't fire the pile the other will. There's no beating Felix Levi when he tries to cheat the Sons of Simon out of their game."

Back once more to the papers on the floor, he lit the match on the bare boards and knelt down.

This time there should be no failure; this time he would see the millions of the dead man go up in smoke and perhaps falling dead himself upon the ashes, would laugh at the victory he had achieved.

Once more the match blazed up.

His hand was near the pile when he suddenly turned his head.

There was a little window alongside the door, but it was curtained. He had heard a noise and it seemed to come from that very window; but, though he looked carefully, he saw nothing, and, for the last time went back to his work.

Old Felix had lit the pile of papers.

He stooped lower to fan the flame with his breath; it seemed slow to catch, and a sudden spasm seemed to take possession of his heart-strings.

His hands caught wildly at the floor, where they rested, and his eyes bulged out.

In an instant that old face assumed the look of a dusky devil's and he fell forward with a cry.

The papers had caught, but his body smothered the increasing flame.

It was all over.

The body seemed to writhe once upon the floor and then stiffen in the last blaze of the three millions of Joel Jaxon.

Old Felix had waited a little too long; he had fought off death till the last moment, and even then had failed.

Now the sound which had caught his keen ears was heard at the window, but only by the mice that came out of fifty crevices in the old den.

There was a hand at the door.

It did not yield; but, all at once it fell inward with a crash, and some one bounded into the room.

This person stopped, as if afraid of stumbling over the obstacle a few steps away; but a moment later, he approached the old Jew, lifted him from the scorched papers and held him off the floor with one hand, while with the other he caught up the bonds.

"This is what I call in the nick of time!" said a triumphant voice. "If death had kept aloof three minutes more, the missing documents would have been ashes. This is more than luck; it is fortune!"

The man carried old Felix to the couch, where he deposited the body, after which he turned to the door and disappeared with the papers in his pocket—with the prize for which the Sons of Simon had schemed and plundered, if not murdered!

CHAPTER XXX.

FERRET AND FOX.

If the reader has wondered what has become of Hiram Hawk the Harlem detective, we will answer this question by taking him to a certain place where the ferret sits in a room which has none of the appointments that characterize the house in Harlem, but where he seems as much at home as there.

Hiram is not quite alone, for on the other side of the table, quietly puffing at a cigar, sits a man who looks quite unlike the keen-eyed, smooth-faced tracker.

Half an hour before the lamps of New York were lighted and their gleams touch the cold stones upon which a drizzling rain is falling.

Away from the lights it would be very dark, for a pall of cloud overhangs the city, and the wind, that comes up the Bay to whistle through the semi-leaffless branches of the trees on the Battery, is quite cold upon cheek and brow.

For some time silence has lain between the two men in the room, which is not far from the top of a flight of steps, and Detective Hawk looks toward the door but with no uneasiness and impatience in his mien.

His companion, who is a large man with a strong face, does not wear the most honest of looks. There is about him the unmistakable jail-bird countenance so familiar to detectives, and his eyes, which are deeply blue, look soft enough, just now.

He gazes at Hiram between whiffs at the cigar and says:

"So Fergus got the lamp squarely in the face?"

"Squarely there, as you say," is the reply. "Nancy Nabbs must have thrown it with vengeful force, for the bowl of the lamp burst as if it had struck a stone wall, and Fergus went back, a picture of flame."

A laugh, which came to the listener, ceased suddenly, and he said:

"Poor devil! But, better that way than the rope."

"That is true. Fergus was in the shadow of the noose."

"That he was; and Con? What has become of him?"

"He will turn up some time, though not very soon, after the man who has been invited to meet you here."

"But, will he come? I long to see him open the door and step in here."

"He has twenty minutes yet."

Hiram's companion looked for a moment toward the portal and his face seemed to harden in its lines.

"It's paying him back in his own coin—I know that. It's giving him a Roland for his old-time Oliver. If he should think of that—but, pshaw! he won't," and he smiled again. "You think you have all the threads in your hands, Hawk?"

"If there is one I don't hold I would be under obligations if you will point it out."

"I know what you have done. I recall the Red Dagger Mystery which you solved while I was housed up. That was a puzzle, but you delved down and down until you had penetrated to the truth, and when you came forward, lo! all the threads were yours! I remember hearing the warden talking about it."

The Harlem Hawk smiled, in a self-satisfied manner, but turned suddenly toward the door.

"Here he is. That is his step for a thousand! You must greet him alone," and the Harlem detective arose, crossed the room on tip-toe, opened a narrow door opposite the table and vanished.

The other remained seated, and looked toward the door which opened into the corridor leading to the steps outside.

He did not have to wait long.

The footsteps that had caught the ferret's

trained ear came to the door and stopped there; then a light rap followed, and the strong-faced man, proceeding to the door, opened it and stood face to face with a person with a close-trimmed beard and neatly dressed.

"Twiller!" cried the caller, as he beheld the man who had admitted him, holding out his hand, which was taken by the other, who at the same time swung the door shut.

The slight click of a bolt told that the door had locked itself.

"You are the Captain. I would not have known you at sight; but, never mind. Now I see that you are the same old friend I had before—"

He ended with a laugh and nodded, which Captain Velvet understood; and, laughing with him, the caller advanced to the table and took the seat just vacated by the detective master.

"You got my letter, Captain?"

"Yes, but you see I waited. You said that it might be best for me to call at this hour—better than in daylight, you know; and I thought that, too. But, I'm here. You look well. It's been—"

The other man broke in:

"At least ten years, and then you didn't get a chance to give me a word. It was only a sign, but at that time silence was golden, eh, Captain?"

"It was, indeed."

"I thought as how you might need me just now," continued Hiram Hawk's companion. "I want something to do—have been looking about me, you know. I feel like an eagle whose wings have been clipped so long that, once in the free air, he wants to fly high, and to pay back the community that clipped his pinions."

"There's a good deal in that," responded Captain Velvet. "You could not have written me at a more opportune time."

"I was hoping as much."

Then they fell to talking, and by degrees Twiller, the ex-convict, led up to the Sons of Simon.

"What have you heard about them?" asked Velvet.

"More than you think, Captain. You forget that I've been out some time—three months come to-morrow. I haven't been idle all that time. I've been casting about me for something to do, and accident gave me a lift. By the way, I saw Fergus die."

"You?"

Captain Velvet was leaning across the table and his breath came in short gasps from his lungs.

"It was an accident. He was struck by a lamp in the hands of Nancy Nabbs; ah, you've heard of Nabbs! I caught a glimpse of Fergus when they picked him up from the gutter, still smoking from that terrible attack, and being anxious to know more, I followed the van to the hospital. I was there when he died. Indeed, I was the sole one with him, heard all he had to say, but you may know, Captain, that it's all here," and the jail-bird laid his hand upon his breast.

"He peached, did he?" asked the Captain, with a grin.

"To me he did. You know what Fergus might have told the police or the detectives if he wanted to? You know that his secrets belong to the Sons. Very few men go into the night of death with such secrets locked in their bosoms."

Captain Velvet said nothing, only his lips met firmly as if he would be one of the few.

"Fergus died with the whole story told, and when I walked from the hospital I felt that you might need me."

The end of the convict's story seemed a relief to Velvet.

He straightened in his chair and looked at his old-time acquaintance.

"Am I wrong, Captain?"

"You are not. I would not be here if I could not use you; if there was not a large stake for both of us at the end of the play," he announced.

"I thought as much."

"It must have been a long hunt for you three," Twiller went on.

"It was."

"You must have picked up thread after thread like a detective."

"There was no other way to do it."

"Of course not."

"When I heard of the end of Tilman Hoy, in the Nest, as they call the old human beehive, I thought of your gift."

The listener started.

"I couldn't help it, you see. Don't you remember the time you caught the lank fellow in the dark, fourteen years ago, in the old French quarter in New Orleans? It was the neatest thing I ever saw done."

A low chuckle came from between Captain Velvet's lips, and he looked away for a moment.

"I know how the ferret-hounds ran hither and thither hunting for the wrong clue. Of course, you salted the place to throw them off the scent. It was well done all the way through. And then, when I happened across the paragraph about the man who was found dead in the Jersey City depot, I thought it very strange that two men should have broken necks."

Captain Velvet winced a little at this.

"You see it's all right," continued the jail bird. "Nancy Nabbs, as I happen to know, was friendly with both these men—with Tilman Hoy and Silas Seabold. Nancy belonged to the trio who were taking care of a man in her house. I know that, too, Captain. Don't you think I am a famous secret-keeper for one who has seen the inside of a prison and precious little else for ten years?"

"You must have had an underground telegraph," laughed Velvet.

"Not only that, but friends on the inside of your circle. But, never mind; I'm Twiller Mumm, as of old."

The convict ceased, and leaning back in his chair looked at the other one in silence.

"I'm glad I can be of service to you," he went on. "But, in my opinion, Captain, old boy, you made one mistake."

"A mistake?"

"We all make them. I would not have those ten years on the wrong side of the ledger of life if we didn't make them. I say I think you made a mistake. It was this:"

Viles Velvet was listening with all intentness, and the convict lowered his voice as he bent forward:

"I think I should have begun with the woman," said he.

"With Nancy Nabbs?"

"Yes, with the tigress of the game. Don't you see, Captain, how she could have ruined you all more than once? She possessed the secret of the dead man to a greater extent than either Tilman Hoy or Silas Seabold. She was with him more; she must have become his confidante; she must have wormed from him statements which he did not repeat in the presence of those two men."

The brow of Velvet seemed to grow dark, but all at once it cleared.

"I might have started in with her, but the other gave me the first chance."

"There was the woman who was clinging to him before I went up," was the response.

"I think her name was Stokes."

"Letty Stokes!" almost hissed the listener. "She's living yet!"

"Indeed? And isn't she trying to ruin you?"

"Yes, curse it! and she came near doing it, too!" grated the chief of the Sons of Simon. "It was a miracle that she did not succeed."

A little silence ensued.

"Let these old things go!" suddenly spoke the Captain. "Let us come down to present business. You're out of a job, eh, Twiller?"

"Would I have written to you if I had my hands full? I take it that you haven't succeeded yet?"

"Not yet; but with you I shall, and that speedily. There need be no violence—"

"Unless, of course, we are pinched by the detectives."

Velvet threw out his right hand and it fell upon the table, where it rested.

"I can take care of them all," said he, almost fiercely.

"A man who had nearly exterminated the triad of secret-keepers ought to be able to do that."

"I can beat all the ferrets at their own game."

"That's good! What is it worth?"

"A cool three million!"

"Was he that rich?"

"He was, and probably more."

"But the girl—his heiress?"

"I can lay my hands on her at any time. There is where I played the slickest game against the ferret who has tried to run us down."

"Who is he?"

"Hiram Hawk from Harlem."

"Where is he now?"

"He is here!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DICE OF FATE.

THE three words were from the Harlem Hawk, as he opened the narrow door.

Vilas Velvet turned in his chair with every vestige of color vanishing from his face.

It seemed to take him a second in which to realize the situation.

The man who had hounded him down stood before him! The handsome figure of the man from Harlem seemed to grow into a Statue of Doom.

As for Twiller, the convict, he fell back in his chair and watched the face of the caged villain.

Captain Velvet and Hiram Hawk had not stood face to face since the night in which he was decoyed to the old house where the fuse was set and lighted, while, bound to a chair, he awaited his fate.

Just before the lighting of the fuse the door had opened and Captain Velvet with a fiendish triumph on his face entered the room, for a last look at his victim.

For some time he had believed the Master Detective dead, but the revelation of little Mellie, the trance-child, and her subsequent rescue from his hands had convinced him that the tireless tracker still lived to harass the guilty.

Velvet, now cornered by the detective, aided by the ex-convict, knew that his talk with the latter had been overheard—knew, too, that the rogue-hunter had made no move without due plan and deliberation, which could have but one end—the closing of the heartless scoundrel's vile career.

Hiram, eying the chief of the Sons of Simon, as he stepped forward, let something fall from his hand upon the table.

It was a glove, at sight of which Captain Velvet's face took on a deeper pallor.

"You know it," said Hiram.

There was no reply, but the deep-plotting, crime-stained man sprung to his feet.

"You have been hired to do this—to decoy me to this place," he grated, turning to the convict. "You have sold yourself to this devil from Harlem!"

A contemptuous smile came to the jail-bird's mouth a moment; but it quickly vanished, leaving it immobile and firm.

"I could tell a story that would more than lock you up," he went on. "I know all about the affair of Trinidadado."

"Go ahead! You shall have all the time you want to explain, and Hiram Hawk will listen to anything you may care to spin about my life."

This defiance was too much for Velvet and for a second he seemed to regard Twiller with withering contempt; then, with the bound of a tiger, he threw himself forward and caught the convict as the fellow sprung to his feet.

Quick as Hiram Hawk was, he was not quick enough to intercept the hands of Velvet, and then, across the floor went two men in a grapple, and in an instant Twiller was pressed against the wall—the gloved hands at the man's neck.

Hastening forward, and exerting all his strength, Hiram flung the enraged man from his victim, but Twiller threw up his hands and sunk to the floor.

"Too late for a thousand!" grinned Velvet, as he fell away from the detective, the glittering manacles now circling those terrible wrists.

Hiram turned to Twiller and lifted the body to a chair, while the eyes of the chief turned green with a devil's victory.

"He sold out to you, eh?" assumed Velvet.

"He did not. He was simply under obligations to me. I saved his life years ago, and he came to me, and asked what he could do to pay off the debt."

That was all, and the man with the man-

acles on sunk into a chair and watched the detective bring Twiller back to life.

For once the terrible hands had failed, and Twiller, the ex-convict, did not follow Tilman Hoy and Silas Seabold into eternity with a broken neck.

Doggedly to the fate which the law meted out to him went the chief of the Sons of Simon.

In this instance justice was stern and unrelenting, and after the termination of the most eventful trail—when the man-hunter had seen his red skein untangled, Hiram Hawk went back to the double house in Harlem to take little Mellie in his arms and promise her that no more would her marvelous gift be called into service.

Belle Natterby turned out to be the child of Joel Jaxon; and Noodles it was who had rescued the bonds from Old Felix's house where the old Jew, Jaxon's treasurer, lay dead upon the scorched papers.

Nancy Nabbs took on a new lease of life when she saw the noose tighten about the Man of the Missing Finger; and Letty Stokes, who had attempted to take his life, came forth again to feel that in this life even there is a justice that satisfies all.

Belle Natterby, after her marriage with her lover, Orrin, rewarded both Hiram Hawk and Noodles; and little Mellie, who has outgrown her singular gift, still lives with the matchless ferret.

The house in Harlem has taken on new notoriety, for the breaking up of the Sons of Simon gave its tenant unbounded fame.

Let us add: Con was never seen again near the scene of his crimes; but, some months afterward, one who knew him saw a man picked up dead from beneath the wheels of a car in another city, and when he drew near to look at the poor crushed face, he knew that Hiram Hawk nor his betters, if they lived, would run down Captain Velvet's last man, and Fergus's friend.

It was a "home run" for the Harlem detective, for at no time during the case did he doubt that he would reach the end and find there not Letty Stokes or "Belle Nemesis," as she was called, but the hand of a man—a giant in agility and power—a Paragon of Evil.

He had succeeded; and, even if Belle had not so fully rewarded him, his most satisfactory reward would have been found in the smiles and kisses of Mellie, the trance-child.

THE END.

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